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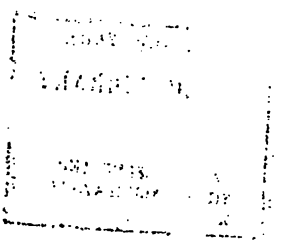
WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE

Olive Beatrice Mui

With Malice Toward None.



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LAL.

WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE

BY

OLIVE BEATRICE MUIR

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TO

FLORENCE E. KITCHING,

WHOSE KINDLY ENCOURAGEMENT HAS CHEERED
WHEN THE WAY WAS DARK AND DREARY,
THIS BOOK IS LOVINGLY AND GRATEFULLY DEDICATED BY

THE AUTHOR.

A DEFENSE

What is recorded in these pages cannot be addressed to the world at large. Common sense forbids it. Only to those understanding, appreciating, and forgiving such temperaments as Lal North's can such a book as this appeal. To all others it would seem a prejudiced attempt at extenuation of a nature censurable to a degree.

It is no easy task to analyze the nature of a girl of Lal North's caliber. When the component parts of such a character are inconsistent beyond anything imaginable, hedged in by circumstances most wretched, the tenderest pity only can be evoked by those understanding. Girl though I was when her wretchedness was at its height, I realized what generous allowances should have been made for her. Perhaps this was because I loved her. I know that long after, whenever I met the same restless, misunderstood spirit in others, it touched me instantly. I could not be other than lenient.

Had her father lived, there is not a doubt in my mind but that the whole course of her life would have been altered—so great an influence has each event in our lives! I feel confident that in a measure the wild, seeking nature would have been curbed, the quick temper taught control, and a peaceful womanhood would have been hers. I repeat, in a measure, for such tumultuous natures can never thoroughly learn the lesson of calmness, however strict the discipline, however sad the experience.

I cannot write bitterly now. There was a time when I could. Had I begun to chronicle these events shortly

after their occurrence, I doubt if I could have written coherently. But Lal forgave them all—all but one, and there she was only human—and though it was harder for me, for I am not of a forgiving temperament, I did as she did. As we grow older, we learn to pity what we formerly hated, to pardon what we were wont to criticise perhaps too quickly, and to view all past events with a broader, tenderer humanity than when we looked at things with the near-sighted eyes of youth.

So it is "with malice toward none" that I disclose for the first time the mistakes Lal made in the beginning of her career. Oh! if her environment had only been different! Environment is everything. It is only the exceptional nature that can rise above it. How many noble natures are lost to the world's bright honor-roll by this same environment! How many bright minds have remained forever in obscurity!

Don't argue that if the will were a determined one, the nature would rise above all fetters of circumstances. Remember, the natures that would have been brilliant, were it not for this environment, are always handicapped by temperament. Temperament—I mean that quintessence of artistic originality—rarely is found in a well-balanced nature.

For you—few I hope—who have known a Lal, and understood her, I write these lines. I cannot say, judge leniently. You have. To the others I can say nothing. But if you cannot understand, do not condemn. Let the ephemeral disposition be judged by its Maker. He will accord it the fullness of His mercy.

With Malice Toward None

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

There were the four children, though people coming and going continually never knew that there were more than three. I mean three, excluding myself.

Ralph (or Rafe as we always called him) was twenty-five and—I have heard some say—handsome. I know he was very like his mother in many ways. Some traits he possessed were peculiarly his own, the result of his observations. No one would ever have thought he was his father's son. His devotion to his business had narrowed his thoughts down to a littleness that was well-nigh startling.

He was utterly lacking in breadth of views. It seemed as if the dust and grime of his office had entered the cells of the mental part of him and choked up the passages. He never read anything but the newspapers, and not all of them. His eyes never got beyond the financial column. In such a rut, never caring to open magazine or book to gain knowledge, he could not broaden. I used to feel sorry for him.

He drew a large salary for one so young. But his business abilities were exceptional. He was generous in streaks. He could be flattered into doing anything if only the flatterer went about the matter delicately and not bunglingly. For even those who are susceptible and respond to flattery quickest do not like to think they are yielding to

such weakness. He loved to be looked up to, to have his words hung upon, his streakishly generous actions commended. He had all a man's weakness for wishing his womenkind to make much of him. From two members of the family he got all that heart could wish in this line.

Their incense was daily offered at his shrine and Rafe inhaled it all with deep breaths of delight. Home was the only place he found it. He had many girls look at him and, meditating upon his truly enviable position, long to be Mrs. Ralph North. But none had fallen in love with him. The chief reason was, I think, because he was so utterly devoid of sentiment. Girls love tenderness in a man, mixed with a dash of sentiment. Rafe, when he tried to infuse sentiment into some of his speeches only appeared ridiculous. He forgot the dividing line between sentiment and sentimentality, and how easily the one can degenerate into the other.

Rafe and I got along well enough together except when he assumed a certain attitude toward Lal. Then he invariably changed; for, for some unknown reason, he did not like to arouse my anger. Why this was I don't know, for I never was smart enough to say real sharp things that hurt.

It would take a gifted pen to sum up in a few paragraphs Lal's nature. I cannot hope to make her contradictory self explicable. Dearly as I loved her, only a vague outline am I capable of drawing. Natures like hers never seem tangible. One day you think you know them. Another day you are free to admit you were downright rash to think you ever could fathom them. If, before the conclusion of this record, I succeed in making just one phase of her nature understandable I shall have accomplished more than I expected.

Lal was barely twenty-one at the beginning of the time of which I am writing. Glancing at her at one time she looked twenty-five. At another time she would not have been thought more than eighteen. She was like some

pictures—she varied in certain lights. She was not the same person two hours at a time. She was either on the hill-tops or in the valleys perpetually. Her views upon certain subjects never were the same two days in succession.

She had times of looking positively beautiful, and when she chose, could easily put Adelaide to second place. Her face fairly sparkled when she was interested. Her animation was one of her great charms. But these moments were rare. More often she looked as if she had been drawn through a knot-hole.

She had the slight physique that sometimes goes with brilliant minds. She was really tall, but she always gave one the impression that she was small. Her vitality was very great, but she lived up to every bit of it. Her nervous energy was always remarkable to all of us. She was quick as a dart in everything, and at times when it was not necessary. But she could not help it. She wasted her strength in expending it where there was no cause. It was useless to tell her this. Her general health was not good.

I never looked for Lal's soul in her eyes. She could veil them. But her mouth always told me her state of mind. I think the mouth the best indication of character. It is the feature most susceptible to change and cannot be easily controlled. She had a fine mouth and beautiful teeth, but her hair was a perfect glory. I never knew anyone to fail to admire it. Even those whose ideals had dark hair could not look at Lal's great wealth without an exclamation. It was very heavy and very fine and the color—oh! the color! —a rich bronze. Not auburn, but bronze. She had the four distinct colors in her hair, red, brown, gold and—gray. Yes, gray hairs, a number of them. I don't know what they came from, but they were there.

One glance at her hands told you the artistic tendency of the girl's nature—white, small and shapely, and nervous, like every other part of her. "Such helpless hands!" as Mrs. North was wont to say, and this because Lal hated with a cordial hatred everything domestic. But for such

"helpless hands" she could do the most astonishing things. There wasn't a thing she couldn't cook, nor fancy work she couldn't do. She despised the latter with all the intensity of a talented nature. She played the piano with a depth of feeling that one would not have thought in her. Her preserves were the most delicious that I ever ate.

She wrote political articles that appalled her father's friends, and they were printed, too. She sang in a way that has made people hunt for their bits of cambric, and she spoke in a voice that simply made men—and women too—look at her without answering her questions. I said her hair was her best point, but her voice in speaking, equaled, if not surpassed it. And how she used it in her powers of mimicry! I have seen her convulse a roomful of people by her imitations of every one of them.

And yet how far from perfect Lal was, I knew, better than all. She was perfectly ungovernable in her passion when her quick temper was aroused. She said things then —indeed, she could say them at any time; it did not need the stimulus of excited nerves—that silenced immediately anyone unlucky enough to provoke an assault. I have seen many a one recoil at her sharp speeches. Quick temper is only a state of excited nerves. When the nerves calmed, and the temper cooled, Lal was at peace with all the world.

She was obstinate and wayward, and yet she was easily influenced by those she respected. Her depth of affection was not great, but when she once got it into her head that she loved or admired a person she was unmanageable, so great was her desire to do for the object of her love or admiration.

She was absurdly generous. If she had had money she would not have kept a penny. Quick to sympathize, and with abounding charity toward all, she looked for the same in others and was disappointed. Critical to a fault, and moody, she was optimistic to an alarming degree at times, and pessimistic at others.

Her sense of the ludicrous was intensely keen. I never

saw anyone like her in this line. With tears in her eyes for some one's unhappiness or her own wretchedness, she would laugh aloud if a funny thing crossed her mind. Intensely religious at times, feeling the true, uplifted happiness that comes from God, there were yet many days in her life when her heart was cold and, as she has told me, she seemed "all shriveled and callous." And yet Lal was no backslider. She had had genuine conversion, but the restless nature had not learned self-government.

A gentleman who had seen much of the world once dined with us, and I noticed that though he told many clever stories and entertained us famously and seemed never for a moment diverted from that entertainment, he observed Lal keenly. And yet his eyes roved from one face to another. As we rose from dinner and strolled into the cozy sitting room, I stood near him as he stepped aside to allow Lal to pass. He caught the same look that I knew so well upon her face and I heard him say under his breath, "Poor chameleon!"

And I have since thought that he was the only one who had ever applied the right term.

Adelaide was another type. I have seen sisters I have thought no more alike than one planet is to another, but never was there such an extraordinary difference between two sisters as there was between Lal and Adelaide North. They might have been the children of utterly different parents for all the likeness between them, physical, mental, moral. There was a closer approach to resemblance between Rafe and Lal (and there was actually none there) than between Lal and Adelaide.

Adelaide was certainly a very pretty girl. She would have been called handsome had not her features been so infantile. She was wonderfully developed for one of her years. At eighteen her figure was that of a mature and very prolific woman. It was voluptuous in the extreme and always caused men to look at her twice. She mistook this for interest in her face. Men do not like, nor do they want,

these voluptuous figures in their wives. They satisfy the carnal eye for a time, but in their calmer moments a man will speak of such figures with a shrug of disgust.

A voluptuous looking woman is not natural. The inner instincts of such a woman, I maintain, are gross and material. A pure mind seldom has such a temple. Adelaide thought her figure magnificent. And so it would have been had one touch of statuesqueness or dignity relieved it of its extremely sensual appearance. But in every curve, wantonness and strong animal desire disported themselves. Adelaide thought her figure constituted her chief attraction. It did.

Her eyes were wide apart, but shifted, showing that her nature might have been frank had not her mind been warped and distorted by unwholesome reading. They were blue and a little prominent, almost bulging. I never saw them soften. Her mouth was large and loose and she opened it very wide when she laughed. But men forgot this when they were making love to her, for her complexion was beautiful, surpassing her mother's in that the flesh was firmer. She had the most beautiful neck and arms I ever saw. Poor Lal's were distressingly far from plump.

Adelaide was thoroughly selfish. Her chief aim seemed to be "good times." If she could gain "a good time," even at the expense of another's discomfort, she did not hesitate to seize it. She loved ease and luxury and considered her wearing apparel the first and prime factor of her existence.

There was no sympathy in her heart for others. She had an exalted opinion of herself, and it showed most plainly in the complacent set of the mouth and the supercilious way in which she carried her head. She was extremely politic outside of her own family and cultivated people purely from motives of gain. She had no real friends. Many admired her freshness of face, but after all, that was all that could be said of it. It was at times like a blank page in its inexpressiveness.

At "small talk" she was just beginning to show a fair amount of prowess. At legitimate conversation she was the most dire failure. But she was sharp in a way. She could always tell when she had made a blunder. And she invariably endeavored to cover it up by laughter. Some people make blunders and never know it. Adelaide was not in this category.

She lacked utterly that originality which marked Lal. In direct contrast, Lal could talk most brilliantly upon any subject under the sun. She talked about things of which she knew nothing equally as well as about things she knew. When she did not know she allowed her imagination free rein. Adelaide was often at a loss for a simple word.

There was none of that magnetism about Adelaide which Lal possessed in such an extraordinary degree. At one time she tried seriously to cultivate an individuality that would impress people, but she only succeeded in making herself appear ridiculous and showed her good sense by relinquishing the much cherished plan.

It was curious to notice, and yet to me it was only natural, that the people who liked Adelaide never were attracted by Lal. Those who admired and in the end loved Lal, invariably disliked Adelaide. Occasionally there was a rare exception, as in the case of one man who visited us.

He had in him the strange, and to me, inexplicable and repellant compound of brains and animalism blended curiously. His earthly senses were captivated by Adelaide's seductive form. His mental capabilities turned to Lal for entertainment. Both girls attracted him. But this was the exception. There are few instances, aside from this, that I can cite.

Roy North was away from home—in disgrace. Just what that disgrace was doesn't matter. The Colonel never liked to hear his name mentioned, though he was not so foolish as to forbid us to speak of him. It had not been the first time that Roy had been sent from home. Time and time again had he been forgiven and returned, seemingly

repentant. But there is a limit to human endurance, and at last Roy left for good.

It caused me terrible anxiety to see Lal grieve so for her brother. She loved him passionately. She had been the only one who had been able to influence him for any length of time. To be sure, that influence was not very much, for the boy never followed any advice, and this had resulted in his going from home for good. It affected Roy but slightly. He was a rolling stone and was always longing for new scenes and new faces. He was quite like Lal in temperament, but otherwise they could not be compared.

He loved her as deeply as she did him, but his nature was volatile and he lived only for the day. At times he would think of her and write, begging to hear from her, if only a line. These appeals would be followed by long silences. Then he would write again, telling her to forget him—that he wasn't worthy of so dear a sister. Lal was always moody after the receipt of a letter from her brother. She would beg him to return home, settle down and by his constant application to work prove to their father that there was honest endeavor in him after all. But Roy always overlooked these persuasions in his replies.

We never could learn just what he did to support himself. But Lal and I concluded it must be as a strolling actor or something of that sort. We were strengthened in our belief, finally, by a picture of him which he sent taken in a fancy costume. The beardless boy of twenty looked older and more manly in this guise than I had ever seen him before.

Lal treasured this picture and gave it a place on her writing desk, until one day when the Colonel strolled in and caught sight of it. Then it was removed to a private drawer.

CHAPTER II

Nineveh, at the time when we lived in the little place, was remarkable only for its varied assortment of dogs. Many people who visited it throughout the year, but chiefly during the summer as a pleasure resort, thought it pretty. But to me there was always a tinge of unhealthiness about the place. I couldn't bear it, notwithstanding the little lakes dotted here and there on the grounds of the private residences and the miniature white bridges which spanned them.

Perhaps the fact that I was the miserable spectator of so much dissatisfaction and unhappiness while there had much to do with it. I had as pleasant a childhood and girlhood as anyone on Long Island, but constantly witnessing trouble, particularly when it involved Lal, depressed me. It made me think sometimes that had we lived in a wider groove, possibly things might not have been as they were.

We didn't live in the village, but on the rim, as it were. We were near enough never to be inconvenienced, and far enough removed to avoid the publicity of the hotels and much of the gossip that was circulated freely by those who thought it their duty to dispense the news.

Our house, roomy and spreading, was one of four in the Park, and surrounded by extensive grounds. It was really a small farm, for we made a great show of raising our own vegetables. The grounds were so beautifully kept that the place looked more like an old English estate than an unpretentious Long Island summer home.

Aldringham Park had been devised and built thirty years before by the father of the kind man who had taken me to his home when my mother died—Lal's father, Colonel North. The great house, the old homestead at the entrance of the Park, had passed into the hands of the eldest son of old Aldringham North, who had promptly proceeded to

mortgage it so heavily by his extravagance that its speedy sale was soon a foregone conclusion.

So, too, had the two other sons lost their inheritance by their own unthrifty method of living, and strangers now occupied the three houses within a stone's throw of our own. Colonel North, alone, the youngest of the four brothers, held his birthright.

We did not live extravagantly, though there were many who thought our four servants, two horses and four carriages meant that we were people of ample means. But two of the four servants were women who had served Colonel North's mother and were almost incapacitated for further use. One of the horses was fairly gray with age, and only two of the carriages could be used, owing to the fact that the brougham and victoria were of a date quite antediluvian.

Our table was always bountiful. We had the best of everything, getting our delicacies from the city. We entertained rarely, but we often attended dances given at the hotels and club houses in Nineveh and adjacent towns. Through the summer there was much life, owing to the influx of city people, but the winter was practically dead.

We would have entertained more had the Colonel's wife had her way. She was very fond of display and loved to play the benignant hostess. But here, if he was lax in other things, the Colonel was firm. He seemed ever to dread the possibility of incurring debts. He was devotedly, almost slavishly, fond of his wife, and sometimes his fear of extravagance was overruled to a degree by her. He often gave her beautiful presents, to procure which I know he must have denied himself. Occasionally, too, he allowed her to hold the purse-strings. These were the moments that I feared. But he remained determined against giving entertainments. They were needless extravagances.

A more just man than Colonel North I never knew. A more lovable one never trod the earth. He had his preferences in people even among his own children. In

that he was human. But he never showed the slightest difference to any one of them. In this he was more than human. Each one stood upon his and her own merits. But that he loved one of his children more dearly than the others I knew. Yet he never, by word or deed, did aught to arouse the jealousy of the others. It was this wonderful control of himself in this line, I think, that made me admire him so intensely.

Of Mrs. North I dread to speak, so fearful am I that I shall not do her justice. For the woman at times tried to do what was right, though she allowed herself to be influenced by the one who did much toward wrecking Lal's life.

She was a plump woman, though small; pretty, still, and with a complexion that was a marvel of beauty and fairness. The mouth was complacent, but the heavy lines between her eyes indicated a temper far from serene.

I have always contended that there are three kinds of temper: Quick temper, bad temper, and ugly temper. There is a fine discrimination for them all, too. It is a matter of opinion as to which is the worst, and which is the least dreadful. I know that to me Mrs. North's temper was always ugly temper. That it was not quick temper is proved by the fact that she rarely got angry quickly. She worked herself up to it gradually. She was of a phlegmatic temperament and loved ease. Perhaps this was why. Bad temper is habitual. And I can say this much, Mrs. North's display of temper was not habitual.

Partiality was a strong trait of Mrs. North's. But it was no stronger than the same characteristic in her husband. The difference lay in their respective control of it. Both could conceal their feelings, but Colonel North was the one who did. His wife made not the least effort to keep from others the knowledge of which one was her favorite child. Perhaps there were two.

Mrs. North, or Aunt Marion as I called her out of courtesy, was always indifferently kind to me. This was

natural when one stopped to consider who my mother had been. When I was old enough to realize matters it was a great surprise to me that she ever tolerated me at all. Many women would not have done so.

Years before when Colonel North was yet a young man he had been deeply in love with a young woman living at Bay Beach. Bay Beach is four miles east of Nineveh. That she returned his love he was not positive, as she was an exceptionally reserved girl. But she did not discourage his attentions and they were often together.

About this time old Aldringham North sent his youngest son West to look after some mining interests. Colonel North, then plain Donald North, left without ascertaining whether the woman he loved reciprocated his affection. This mistake, for it was the greatest of his life, arose from the fact that he felt certain he would return in a few weeks and he chose to make the simple test of allowing his sweetheart's face to speak for her. He argued if she loved him he would know it instantly by the way in which she received him upon his return. And he was young enough to trust to chance.

He had not been absent from home a fortnight when his chum wrote him telling him of the engagement of the girl he adored to a young man who had been paying her attention for some time. Donald took it calmly, though the blow was a terrible one. The frontier troubles were then imminent. He enlisted, was promoted to the rank of colonel, badly shot in the leg in a skirmish and nursed back to strength by the daughter of his captain. Marion Lane saw in her patient a promising young man. She set to work immediately to convey the impression that Donald's fine eyes had completely captivated her. She was an adept in conveying impressions.

Donald North soon realized he had made the girl love him desperately, and attracted by her beauty he married her.

In time he learned to love her. Never quite as he had

loved the one he had left at home, but when a woman bears a man children he is apt to become attached to her in time, even though at first he has had no love for her. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he never learned that his wife had never loved him. Some women can so disguise the state of their hearts.

Colonel North settled in Denver for a time. Then his father died suddenly and he returned with his young wife and infant son to take up his residence in the house his father had built for him in the Park during his absence. He occasionally went to Bay Beach on business matters, but he never saw the love of his early manhood, though he knew she still resided in her native place.

The year after Lal was born a summons came from Bay Beach for Colonel North. It was from Mrs. Kersey, Colonel North's former sweetheart. Her husband had died that morning. He had been drowned while out shooting on one of the lakes by the accidental discharge of his gun, the shock of which had thrown him into the water after he had been rendered unconscious. His face had been torn almost beyond recognition. His terrible death prostrated his wife and two hours after his body was brought to the house her child was prematurely born.

Its birth cost her her life, but before she died she had Donald North's firm assurance that as long as he lived her little daughter would never lack a father's nor a mother's care. He would be both. As my mother had no relatives, and my father's people lived in England, I passed completely into Colonel North's family.

The Colonel's wife knew the entire story of her husband's early romance when he took me to his home. Jealousy was not foreign to her nature, but because she never really loved him, she never looked upon me with aversion as another woman might have done. Instead, she considered me in the light of a necessary encumbrance to be gotten rid of when the opportunity conveniently and peaceably presented itself.

Had she seen in me a possible rival to either of her daughters she might not have regarded me so tranquilly. But Adelaide was beautiful and Lal was brilliant. I had neither beauty nor brilliancy. I had been often told I was "a good little thing," but I had come to regard this as a doubtful compliment.

I was dressed as well as either of Mrs. North's own daughters. But I think the Colonel was responsible for this. I was admitted to the family conclaves when serious matters were discussed, as they often were. I was never looked upon as an interloper. My parentage was as good as that of the Colonel's children, I was told. In fact I was one of the family, and strangers never knew the difference until they were enlightened by some well-meaning person.

CHAPTER III

The end of the winter was approaching, and the last of the season's dances was at hand.

It was to be held in the club house on the hotel promontory overlooking the village. We were anticipating it with more interest than we had its predecessors, for out-of-town visitors promised to make it livelier than heretofore.

Nineveh had almost no society at all. Beyond the couple of dozen young people who formed our country clique there was none. Our city friends got in but rarely to attend these functions. On this occasion, however, we expected two or three young men we knew.

This last dance was not to be quite so select as formerly. Outsiders were to be admitted. I was rather glad of this, for it is not conducive to broadmindedness to be so select. An added piquancy was lent to this dance because it was to be something on the order of a *bal masque*. Nothing elabo-

rate was promised, but each guest was to appear in costume and until 12 o'clock keep his features concealed behind the necessary silken mask.

For weeks we had been deliberating about the characters we were going to impersonate. Lal insisted each should read up, and the better to assume the characters, study about them. This was easy for her, for she was a born actress. I could readily see where Rafe and Adelaide and I would be nonplused.

Rafe had decided to go as a knight. He certainly looked very knightly in his doublet and hose. How well he would act the part I very much doubted. He was no lady's man, and we girls always looked around, after having safely arrived at a dance, for other cavaliers upon whom to depend. If we had relied upon Rafe for all the etceteras we would have relied in vain.

I remember at one dance when there was a very small contingency of the masculine gender, Lal didn't get so much as an ice to refresh her. She maintained a grim silence, however, until we all got home. Then Rafe was treated to a homily which convulsed the rest of us, but which he viewed from a standpoint not at all likely to agitate his risibilities.

Adelaide had announced she was going as Cleopatra. I was watching with much curiosity as to the extent of her researches into the character. She resurrected two books on ancient history belonging to Lal, and read diligently for a couple of days. How she thought she ever could look the character I can't imagine, unless it was she felt the great point of similarity lay in her figure being like that of the famous queen. For she was not dark, and her forehead was high. Nevertheless she darkened her brows that night, and in an oriental costume she had had much trouble in procuring, and with some heavy antique bracelets belonging to her mother, she was a very contented girl.

Lal had determined upon Ophelia, the ill-fated love of Hamlet, as her disguise. I must confess her choice puzzled

me. There were so many other characters which would have suited her so magnificently—Elizabeth, for instance. I begged her to go as the Virgin Queen, pointing out to what advantage her beautiful hair would show when dressed in the Elizabethan coiffure, and how stately the great ruff would make her appear. I could just fancy the sensation she would create in the ball room.

But she wouldn't hear of it. Ophelia was her choice. She had always admired the character. She wouldn't go as anything else. To punish her for being so stubborn I wouldn't tell her what I intended wearing, and I bound the others to secrecy. Lal fussed and teased and endeavored to ascertain in every possible manner. But to show her how determined I was, I never let her know and guarded my secret so well that when we arrived at the club house that night she was still unenlightened. And she had tried to peep under my outside wrap too, to obtain a glimpse of the colorings of my dress.

We had gathered in the sitting room while waiting for the carriage, as Colonel North and his wife wished to view us in costumes—all but the writer. I had given them a private exhibition before going downstairs.

Adelaide looked sumptuous in her white and gold raiment. Her hips were very much in evidence, for she had tightened herself at the waist line in a way I very much doubt the Egyptian Queen affected. But otherwise she was a handsome bit of flesh and blood. I saw her father look at her in the startled way a man looks at his daughter when it suddenly dawns upon him that that daughter is one to attract men. Mrs. North's admiration was expansive with its smile of admiration. She gazed at Adelaide, seeing in her the reflection of her own youthful beauty emphasized, and was proudly satisfied thereat.

It was an expression of pain that settled deep in the Colonel's eyes as his glance fell upon Lal. She was not looking her most radiant. What she wore and the way in which she had arranged her hair only accentuated the

fragility of her figure. She wore a chaplet of wood violets about her head and she had twined rosemary in the shower of hair that fell far below her waist. It was beautiful, but so fantastically arranged as to make me think in very truth I beheld Ophelia in the flesh. Never have I seen a more pathetic impersonation of the character. In her soft draperies, her disarranged hair and the melancholy expression of her speaking face, she was a perfect embodiment of Ophelia

The Colonel approached her slowly, lost in reflection. I knew his heart, like mine, was throbbing at the picture before him. Lal had a way of touching one's very heart strings when she looked at all pathetic.

"What prompted this, my dear?" asked her father; "do you think you can live up to this character all evening?"

"'I think nothing, my lord,'" and Lal made a little grimace.

"That is a part of your mood to-night, eh? Well, a silent woman is a jewel, I suppose, though I prefer one who can talk."

"Oh! she'll talk. Give her time," said Rafe, admiring the effect his silken hosiery gave his legs.

"'What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?'" quoted the Colonel, laughing.

"'Words, words, words! Only this and nothing more,'" answered Lal, mingling the immortal bard and Poe with charming indiscrimination.

"How becoming your suit is!" exclaimed Mrs. North as her eyes left Adelaide's figure long enough to allow them to become enamored of her son's *tout en semble.*

"Isn't it too dear!" was Adelaide's comment as she went nearer to hang upon his arm; "I can just hear what people will say to-night. 'Who's that handsome young man with those three young girls? What distinguished features! And how very proud his sisters must be of him!' For they can easily see the family resemblance."

Rafe looked at her amused, but none the less impressed

by her acute powers of observation. He had barely bestowed a glance upon Lal's appearance, but he had smiled approvingly upon Adelaide. They pulled together famously, anyway, and always would, I supposed, as long as Adelaide tendered her candied speeches, and Rafe responded to them in some substantial manner.

The Colonel went over to Adelaide to compliment her upon her appearance and incidentally to learn the method she had employed in darkening her brows.

Mrs. North looked at Lal with badly concealed annoyance.

"Such an outrageous character to assume!" she said, frowning at the tangled meshes of her daughter's hair glittering and shimmering under the light.

"It at least has the redeeming quality of morality," replied Lal, loftily, with a barely noticeable glance at Adelaide.

"Addie's hair is confined in a respectable way. I don't see why you couldn't have worn yours up," argued her mother in a vexed way.

"Ophelia, at the time I am representing her, was supposed to be mad," said Lal, explanatorily; "mad people are not very particular about orderliness of hair, are they, Peggy?" appealing to me.

"I don't see that Margaret is an authority on mad people," Mrs. North was beginning, with some heat, for Lal's undisturbed air always irritated her, when I tried to smooth matters by answering quickly.

"Oh, but Lal looks the character so—at least she'll impress everyone, I am sure. That's the main thing at these masquerades."

Mrs. North seemed inclined to answer and continue the argument, but fortunately Rafe claimed her attention at that moment to pin a bow in place, and I seized the opportunity to divert Lal's mind from any thought of controversy.

"How well Roy would have looked as Hamlet!" I said, [illegible]ing by her expression that her thoughts were of her [illegible].

"Yes, with his shock of red hair. I can picture the congruity," and she laughed at me.

"He could have worn a wig," I asserted.

"Two of them, for that matter," she answered; "but he couldn't have worn a dignity nor a solemnity he didn't possess. No, Peggy, the melancholy Dane isn't Roy's style. Poor boy! I don't suppose he's attending a masquerade to-night—except of feelings."

And she sighed. But the next moment she had bounded from her position on the edge of the sofa's arm as she heard the sound of wheels in the porte-cochere.

"The carriage," came back her voice from the piazza, and we hurried out, the Colonel and Mrs. North following us.

We were a few minutes getting settled, and as Rafe was assisting Lal in beside me she turned from him abruptly and in her quick way ran back up the steps to where her father stood a little in advance of his wife.

She looked little like Ophelia then, for her face was laughing as she broke a piece of rosemary from the sprays among her hair and pressed it into her father's hand.

"There's rosemary; that's for remembrance," she said, kissing him, and as he switched her lightly in the face with the sprig, she added, "pray you love, remember us at the dance to-night. You may see us back earlier than we expect, for if we don't live up to our characters the penalty is expulsion, some one said."

"Oh, you'll all do us credit," said Mrs. North, from her position in the doorway, "we're not afraid of that."

Lal returned to her place, John gave the signal to the horses, and with "good luck" ringing in our ears we were driven away to our dance.

CHAPTER IV

"What a foolish thing for her to do! She's so sentimental!" exclaimed Adelaide, as we adjusted our habiliments in one of the dressing rooms. Lal had thrown her outer garments aside and was talking in another room with the representative of music.

"You might have said 'sentimental' if she had given it to some fellow instead of her father," I retorted, "one can never be sentimental about one's father, though you can be foolishly doting about other members of the family."

"That's one for Rafe and two for me," said Adelaide, undisturbed; "I might know you'd champion Lal. Talk of being foolishly fond of people! You are a shining example, Margaret Kersey."

"Too bad you aren't the object," I laughed mischievously, "no objections could be made then."

"No, thank you. I decline the position. Whoever places me on a pedestal shall be a man. It's unnatural for a woman to be worshiped by a woman," and she walked out of the dressing room, leaving me indignant at her inference.

There were others in the room, but we had carried on our conversation at one end and our faces, like theirs, had been concealed by masks. I thought I recognized the profile of a friend dressed as Portia and went over to speak to her, disguising my voice as well as I could.

"Good evening," I said, in something between a falsetto and my own natural tones.

"Good evening, Margaret. Can't you do better than that?"

"Florence Westlake!" I said, "don't discover me to any one, particularly to Lal, will you?"

"Of course not. Is she here? What's her costume?"

"It's not fair to tell, though finding out by accident will have to be permitted."

"Well, if she's wearing a wig I'll never know. She's clever at disguise. But one glimpse of her hair would tell me. There isn't another head like it in the room."

"I agree with you."

"Where Lal is concerned you always do. Shall we go down? There are many on the floor."

"Can you tell the strangers from the Ninevites?" I asked, as we went through the hall together.

"Sometimes. There's one very distinguished man here I'm positive has never been in this village before. Tell me if you don't think he's fascinating."

"Why, have you seen his face?" I asked, in astonishment.

"No. But his bearing is the most remarkable I ever saw in a man. He keeps aloof from the others. I haven't seen him talk to anyone. If he wasn't so splendid in his carriage it would look suspicious."

We had reached the ball room and to the throbbing strains of the waltz from Robin Hood the oddly assorted couples were gliding through the steps. I didn't see Lal anywhere and concluded she must still be upstairs. Adelaide was dancing with a cavalier in blue and silver spangles. Their costumes harmonized beautifully and I heard many comments.

Rafe was bending over a girl enveloped in white tulle and water lilies. He did not dance at all, except an occasional square dance. I could imagine just about what he was saying to his companion.

"We can't make our way across that floor. It's too crowded," I said; "let's wait here."

There was a window seat behind us, unoccupied, and from this vantage ground we watched the bright scene before us.

"I s'pose we'll have to dance with anyone who asks us, stranger or no stranger," said Florence, "I don't think I like such promiscuosity."

"If your interesting stranger asks you I don't think you'll give two thoughts about the matter," I said, amused; "where is he? What's his costume?"

"I don't know where he is now," answered Florence, craning her neck in every direction; "he had a—"

She was tugging at my dress, for there had appeared in the doorway at our left a man whose manner at once impressed me as unusual. His physique was magnificent, and he held himself in a way I could see had been cultivated to show his proportions to the best advantage. He wore no wig, for he was evidently proud of his heavy hair, which, while very dark, was tinged with gray at the temples after the manner affected by actors. That his eyes were dark and very expressive I could see through his silken mask. He had a fine jaw and a very slight cleft in his chin.

I looked at his costume a long time and presently recognized it as that pertaining to the character of Young Marlowe in Goldsmith's comedy "She Stoops to Conquer." I doubt if I would have known this if I hadn't seen the play the week before. One of my mother's old friends who lived in the city occasionally asked me to spend the day with her and she generally took me to the matinee.

The object of my scrutiny was perfectly unconscious of it. He stood in the doorway, allowing his eyes to drift from face to face. He seemed to me like a man difficult to be interested in anything. It was most evident he saw nothing which appeared to him novel, or even attractive. I wondered if my eyes would ever view things the way his seemed to be viewing them now.

"He's a professional man of some sort," muttered Florence under her breath, watching him; "isn't he fascinating, just to look at?"

"I'd like to see more of his face," I answered; "at 12 we will. I can tell you better then if he is 'fascinating.' Oh, yes, he's certainly a professional man. He might be in the army, he holds himself so straight."

"He's not an officer," said Florence, with conviction;

"there is too much of the man of the world about him. What handsome eyes!"

"Hush! He'll hear you," I remonstrated, under my breath; "what's he looking at? Well—at last he's aroused."

"He's really aroused," echoed Florence, "why—"

"It's Lal. Look at her!" I ejaculated, "my goodness—"

I broke off in utter helplessness of speech, so absorbed was I in the picture.

The dance had come to an end and the orchestra at the other end of the room began an overture for the promenaders. Couples were pausing on their way out to the glass-enclosed piazzas. From my position I could easily see the object of universal attention.

Lal had entered and stood by one of the tall vases near the orchestra playing for the promenaders. She had thrown so much of the weariness and abandon of Ophelia into her own lissome figure that her attitude was one of the most artistic of all the artificial ones I had ever seen her assume. For pure delicacy of grace it was perfect.

At her side, clad in his sable habiliments, stood the finest Hamlet, physically speaking, I ever saw. There was the necessary air of melancholy pervading his whole attitude as he bent over Ophelia with a strange commingling of bitterness and tenderness. I longed to see both their faces. I knew Lal's was fairly speaking under her mask. She no doubt was jubilant at finding the mate to her character. I wondered what they could be saying.

"O! rose of May! dear maid, sweet Ophelia!" interrupted my meditations.

I turned and saw it was Young Marlowe addressing a gentleman in the guise of Mephistopheles. I could not repress a start. The voice was one I had heard the week before at the theater. The interesting stranger was an actor. I wouldn't have been a girl had I not edged nearer the two in an endeavor to hear and see more. A real, live actor, and a well-known one at that, seen off the stage was not an

every-day occurrence. How interested the others would be when I told them!

"Who is she?" I heard Young Marlowe ask.

His companion was gazing as intently as he at the two ideal-looking characters in the distance.

"I don't know. I am not a native," the other answered; "that hair isn't a wig, is it?"

"If you were an actor you wouldn't ask that," was said in the same rich tones; "it's the most naturally beautiful thing I've seen this year."

Lal made a move at this moment to join the promenaders. Hamlet refused to spoil the illusion he could not fail to see they were making by offering his arm. Instead, he strolled by her side on the way out.

" 'But soft; behold! lo, where it comes again! I'll cross it, though it blast me.' "

I looked up in time to see the actor move away. The quotation had not been said lightly. The very earnestness had alarmed me, there had been so much strength to the words.

Knowing Lal's impressionable nature and not knowing just what mood she might have acquired since we had left the house, I felt it incumbent that I should not allow my wits to wander. I slipped out into the hall and around to a window at the end of the piazza. The window was near the door through which I had seen Lal and her escort pass. I put my face up close to the pane and saw her standing near an arch within the broad railing talking to her companion.

She didn't seem very interested, and I saw her eyes rove constantly. Presently she caught sight of the figure of Young Marlowe standing in the doorway, his white satin suit gleaming in the light from the hall.

I saw immediately her attention was arrested. Hamlet was oblivious of a third party. Then I saw Young Marlowe have the audacity to leave the doorway and saunter toward them.

"He's daring!" I was curious of gasping to myself,

when I saw Rafe coming up the steps from the grounds with a young man appareled as a gondolier. They joined Lal and the Dane and I had the satisfaction of seeing Young Marlowe pass them on his way round to another entrance.

But I knew by the determined jaw of the man that he meant he would meet Lal before the night was over. I was equally determined he should not. I had been recalling the man's face to my mind since seeing him the week before and remembered now quite clearly the features. It had been a face that had impressed me then by its magnetism—the kind of magnetism that some women would have need to fear. I was longing for 12 o'clock and a closer scrutiny.

I returned to the ball room, but not before I had stumbled against the gondolier in the hall. I felt he must be one known to us. So I said:

"Where are Lal and the others?"

"What makes you so sure I know?" was the reply, in a feigned voice.

But I laughed at the first sound.

"As if I couldn't tell your voice among a thousand, Howell," I said.

He tried to lift my mask, but I barred him off.

"You look real cute to-night, Peggy," he said, making a second attempt, while I told him to behave himself; "how well that Puritan dress becomes you."

"No compliments, sir. They aren't like you. Where did you leave the others?"

"I think they are going to have a lanciers next. They were talking of getting eight of us in the set. I left them in the ante-room."

"You mean eight of our own set?" I said.

"Of your set, yes. You know I'm not in that, Peggy." And he smiled, the sunny smile which formed the chief part of his personality. "Who are you going to dance with? Are you engaged?"

"No."

"Dance with me?"

"I wish you'd dance with Lal instead," I said, "she—"

"But she's got a partner by this time," he interrupted.

"Let's go and find out," I said, and we went in to join the others.

They were congregated in the ante-chamber laughing and talking, while Rafe and Morton Cole were trying to discover the ones they were seeking for the set. Lal, Adelaide and Florence Westlake were talking apart.

"Have you a partner, Miss North?" I asked, approaching them, and effectually disguising my voice.

"Why, the set isn't formed yet," said Lal.

"Oh, did you see that man—Young Marlowe?" Adelaide asked suddenly, "I wish they'd get him for fourth gentleman."

"Is there any likelihood?" I asked, quickly.

"If he's the man I think he is, there is," observed Florence.

"Isn't that overture beautiful?" said Lal, pausing in the tattoo she was beating on the floor; "it's Les Preludes, isn't it? Just listen. Doesn't that sad little strain at the end tell much? That whole overture seems as if it were recounting the history of the world from the beginning. That heart-breaking phrase toward the end is God weeping over the sins of the world."

"What you have said 'is in my memory locked, and you yourself shall keep the key of it,'" I heard a familiar voice say.

I looked up. The actor was standing beside Lal. I hadn't seen him come in. I didn't give Lal a chance to reply, for I said to Howell under my breath:

"Ask Lal to dance with you—ask her, quick, quick, ask her."

Without a moment's hesitation Howell had asked her for the dance and Lal had promptly promised it to him. But not before she had seen, as I had, that Young Marlowe had been on the verge of asking for it himself.

Plainly the actor was disappointed at his second defeat.

But he turned to me quickly and, bowing low, asked for the honor of the lanciers. I saw it was only to gain a place in our set. I was sure he had heard us talking. About to refuse, I was interrupted by Morton Cole. He was a city man we had known for some time and I detested him. He spoke with a drawl and wore an expression of habitual boredom. The species is not rare.

"We're short a man," he said; "Rafe has an engagement to sit this lanciers with some one and he can't seem to find anyone to fill his place. Oh, you have a partner, Margaret? Then we're all right. Come, they're striking up. You'd better get your places."

There was no help for it. I felt I could not be guilty of breaking up a set. I was half curious as to the result of the adventure and wholly glad that I had succeeded in keeping my impressionable girl from the actor. Calmly I accepted the proffered arm of my companion and followed the others to the ball room.

CHAPTER V

If Lal was vexed because the actor had failed to become her partner she did not show it. She was perplexed that Howell had asked for the dance, however, I saw that. He usually danced with me. She and Howell did not understand each other, but Howell admired her very much. She was indifferent to him as she was indifferent to so many.

The four of us were opposites and dancing together gave the actor a number of opportunities to take Lal's exquisitely slender figure in his arms. I tried to argue that it was only a dance, that it was purely conventional. But when I recalled the dangerous charm of the man's face as I had seen it the week before, I rebelled.

It had been a face that did not altogether satisfy me,

though there was nothing evil about it. Nevertheless, I kept strict watch that he made no advances. But I felt I would be helpless in a measure. For could not Lal accept the courtesies of one man as well as another?

Adelaide did not look entirely happy even though she knew she was dancing with the wealthiest young man in the room. Her own interest had been keenly aroused. Indeed, almost everyone had marked the stranger, so individual was his personality. But Adelaide divided her attention between her partner and the actor very noticeably. She laughed constantly and endeavored to attract Young Marlowe's glance.

But he had no eyes for aught save Lal. He never once forgot his duty toward me. He made me enjoy the dance as I have rarely enjoyed any square dance. By his gallantry and grace I was almost won from any thought of watching him in his demeanor toward Lal. But I saw the charm of her personality was attracting him every minute with added witchery.

He looked as if he would like to change clothes with Hamlet, who was conducting Florence through the steps. The fact that he didn't wear Hamlet's garb, however, did not deter him from making some of Hamlet's speeches.

" 'Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring?' " he asked as he passed her once. He bent his head to say it, but I caught the words, almost whispered, and heard Lal's quick reply.

" ' 'Tis brief, my lord.' "

" 'As woman's love,' " and the dark eyes flashed behind their mask.

"Or man's vows," she answered, lightly.

Then he said something I didn't catch, but intent upon Lal's answer, I caught that "There are few village swains in this neighborhood," and could imagine what he had said.

Fearful that further conversation would elicit the fact as to where we lived and permission to call, I began to talk rapidly and with a volubility that I hardly recognized as proceeding from myself. My companion stared, but an-

swered intelligently, though he kept his eyes fixed upon Lal.

Adelaide dropped her handkerchief during the grand chain. I saw it was done with intent. Young Marlowe secured it, though Morton Cole made the attempt also. The actor returned it with a smile. I saw he looked at Adelaide with admiration for the moment. There were few people who failed to accord her that. Her voluptuous figure was a challenge to any man.

"The Queen's lace handkerchief," he said in French as he presented it.

The compliment was lost, for not a word of French did Adelaide know. But she did not betray the discomfiture she must have felt. Instead, she smiled as if she knew perfectly. She was particularly ignorant for her years. Books, or the acquirement of knowledge from any source, had never held any attraction for her. But a certain air of assurance carried her through.

Lal caught the phrase and understood. She was a perfect French scholar. She had had no greater advantages than Adelaide, but she always shone where Adelaide was deficient.

"Le roi s' amuse," murmured Lal as the actor chassed with her.

"Mais—elle est belle, n' est-pas?"

"Certement, elle est ma soeur." And I knew Lal was smiling behind her mask.

"Impossible!" ejaculated the actor.

"Comment?" I heard the calmness of indifference in her voice.

"Si differente," was his low answer as he twirled her to her place.

"What are they saying, Margaret?" Adelaide asked me as she passed me in the dance.

"They're talking in French. You know what a poor scholar I am," I answered.

Lal turned quickly at the sound of my voice, recognizing it for the first time during the evening.

"Peggy Kersey, is that you?" she said abruptly; "how well you have veiled your identity."

At that moment the big clock above the platform began striking in its silvery tones the hour of 12. It was heard above the sound of the orchestra. At the first intonation a man jumped upon a chair and called in stentorian tones.

"Ladies and gentlemen will please remove their masks."

In a twinkling and with much expectant laughter, for most of the guests had preserved their identities, the silken coverings were removed. I saw Lal's face glow under the actor's steady glance. She let her eyes drop and my heart stood still for a moment at this sign, for until now her eyes had always met men's frankly and bravely.

There was nothing impertinent in the actor's glance, but I resented it. Notwithstanding the look of mingled admiration and tenderness which deepened the color of his eyes as he looked at her, for it was impossible to watch Lal without experiencing a pang of pity, I was angry. The look was too ardent. What right had he to gaze so at a girl he had never before met or even seen? Perhaps it was the right of privileged manhood. But I did not choose to excuse it on that ground.

That his face was fine and utterly devoid of rascality I saw. But the magnificent physique of the man, the commanding head, and above all the determined mouth and chin convinced me that though a man of principle, his passions were strong and that where he loved he would possess, no matter what the consequences. Moreover, he had that fatal personality which I knew in my heart had never been and probably never would be resisted.

I did not know enough of men to determine, then, whether or not Lal had really touched his heart. My common sense told me that he had doubtless had a hundred experiences in the ways of love. Was he not an actor, vividly handsome, and—I looked at him closely—he looked all of thirty-eight. And I made allowances for wine suppers,

grease paint and the general wear and tear of the life an actor leads.

Thirty-eight! Was it likely a man of that age who had probably seen much and met scores of pretty and beautiful women, had passed through the fire unscathed? Was it probable he had remained impervious to any one of them until now? I lectured myself for even entertaining for a moment such a ridiculous supposition.

No one seemed particularly anxious to leave the floor, though the dance had ended. Each set was eagerly discussing the costumes of the couples that comprised it. We stood in a picturesque group, all talking at once, oblivious as to who were partners now; all but Lal and the actor. They were conscious of no one but each other. I saw Young Marlowe bend his head and say something, as he offered her his arm.

"But Peggy—" began Lal irresolutely, taking the arm.

"Your sister?"

"Yes, in everything but blood. She—"

"Will get another escort and prefer it," he answered; "the one who danced with you. Let us promenade."

They turned away.

The orchestra began the lulling bars of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Involuntarily Lal paused. She was keenly susceptible to certain kinds of music.

"That is an exquisite thing," I heard her say, "but oh! how it haunts one. I have heard it quite often of late. Don't you think some pieces have a trick of pursuing one? I know I have seen certain people who suggest certain melodies to me just as animals put one in mind of men and women, too."

My observing eyes caught the quick look of interest the actor gave his companion. I didn't hesitate after that.

"Lal!" I called in desperation, hardly knowing what I could say next.

She stopped instantly.

"Where are you going?" I asked, leaving the others to approach her.

"Only to the veranda. I—"

"You are too warm. The nights are chilly yet. Come with me in the bowling alleys till later."

I looked at her warningly. She saw why I wanted her and her mouth smiled mischievously over her perfect teeth.

"I brought a heavy shawl. See—I couldn't possibly take cold with this."

She wrapped the fleecy wool about her and the actor helped her to adjust it.

"She is really well protected, Miss Kersey," he said; "have no fear. I will watch her carefully."

"She is not strong," I replied firmly, wondering for the moment how he knew my name; then remembering, "I must appeal to her brother."

"I'd like to know what Rafe has to say about it?" Lal answered hotly, and I saw where I had made a mistake; "don't make yourself ridiculous, Peggy. I shall do as I like."

She turned away with the air of insulted royalty. Her companion smiled. The smile determined as well as angered me. I looked around for Rafe. He was not in our group and I seized upon Howell, who was talking to Florence.

"Where is Rafe? Get him immediately for me," I said, with my usual disregard of politeness; "Lal—"

"There he is now," commented Florence; "why, what on earth is the matter with him? Look at him—why—"

I looked. Rafe was coming toward us, his face deathly pale, his eyes staring. I knew his nature too well to think that a slight cause could produce such a metamorphosis. I forgot Lal in my alarm. But his first words brought her back to my mind with a tremendous rush.

"Get your things quickly," he said; his voice was so shaken as to render his words almost unintelligible; "come home—John's waiting—hurry—"

"What's the matter?" interrupted Adelaide, turning from Cole, whose compliments never seemed to pall upon her.

"Father's sick—he's had a stroke—there's no time to lose—"

I waited for no more. Conscious only that dear Colonel North was lying ill, struck down by that dread paralysis, I made my way to the veranda, stumbling, tripping, falling. Each time I was helped to my feet from some unseen source. My mind was in a tumult of thought. My eyes saw no one until they caught sight of the lithe girl's figure on the veranda almost hidden by the man's form beside it. The two had barely taken a turn. Lal was laughing as I reached them. But she stopped when she saw me. I felt, rather than saw, the frown upon the actor's face.

I caught her by the arm.

"Come, come away, dear," I said, "Uncle Don is ill—very ill—" as I saw her look of incredulity; "the others are waiting. Rafe—"

"It's a ruse," she said, but Howell, who I now realized had kept close to my side, interposed.

"He has had a stroke. You are wasting—"

Like a dart she had gone from our midst. Always quick in her movements, I was never surprised at anything Lal did. But now with the others I gazed a moment stupidly. The first thing I knew Howell was fastening my wraps around me and leading me to the carry-all. I don't know what became of the actor. I didn't look to see. Never was man left more unceremoniously.

I heard the signal given to the horses, saw Adelaide questioning Rafe, heard one wild sob from Lal as she threw herself upon my bosom, and I realized that the galloping horses were hurrying us to the bedside of a dying man.

CHAPTER VI

Mrs. North met us at the door of the Colonel's room. He had been carried there immediately, after he had been stricken, though his clothing had not been removed. She was hysterical and unreasonable through her fear. She was speaking to the servants in a way that always made me turn cold, so harsh were her tones.

"You must not come in," she said to all of us as we paused irresolutely before her, dazed by the suddenness of the calamity. "Dr. Breeze is inside now. He insists upon quiet."

But Lal had brushed by and was on her knees by her father's side before her mother had ceased speaking.

"Let me go in, Aunt Marion," I implored; "I may be able to do something. I can at least keep Lal quiet."

But there was no need of that.

When Mrs. North stepped aside to allow us all to file in, though she had ordered otherwise, not a sound could be heard in the room except the stertorous breathing of the prostrate man. Dr. Breeze looked disapprovingly as we silently grouped ourselves about the footboard. He stood at the head counting the pulses of the patient. He stood almost directly over Lal, but I don't think she saw him or that she knew he was there. Her face was buried in the coverlet.

Presently she raised it and fixed her eyes on the Colonel's.

"Father!" she entreated, "don't you know any of us? Make some sign, dear. If you can, hold up one of your hands."

The Colonel's eyes opened calmly and, as it seemed to me, rationally, but the instant they rested upon Lal's white face I knew death was a question of but a few hours. For

a moment his eyes left her face and roved pitifully from one to another of the others. Then they returned to Lal's strained gaze and rested there.

She took the hand that lay helplessly over the side and kissed it with a passionate fervor I had never seen her evince before. She had always been very guarded in expressions of affection, particularly in her mother's presence.

"Is it—paralyzed?" she asked Dr. Breeze, who was watching her.

"Both sides," was the answer. After a pause he added, "Your father knows he has only a little while to live. If there is anything to be said to him or settled, now is the time."

He started to leave the room. As he passed me he whispered, "Reassure him. He has something on his mind."

I reflected then that Dr. Breeze knew, as did others, the trouble Uncle Donald had had with Roy.

Rafe closed the door after the doctor. Then he drew nearer, with his mother and Adelaide, toward the bed. No one attempted to usurp Lal's place. Mrs. North sat down on the edge of the bed and stared into her husband's face. Adelaide knelt at her knee. Rafe stood at the side of the bed. I had crept up behind Lal in the corner.

Rafe broke the silence that seemed to rest like a pall upon us.

"I will speak of certain things, father," he said, "that we know you must be thinking of. For an affirmative answer, close your eyes. If you desire otherwise, keep them open. First, let us know if you understand this, and that we are all here, Laura, Addie, Margaret, mother and myself."

Slowly the Colonel closed his eyes and opened them again. How grotesquely sad the scene was not one of us realized then; but costumes, such as ours, more out of place in a death chamber could not be imagined.

Long, long afterward in speaking of the scene Lal told me it had reminded her of a painting, and that she never

expected to see such beautiful grouping again. Such were her artistic perceptions even at a time so fraught with sorrow.

Looking back upon it myself, I can recall with vivid distinctness the colorings in the garnet velvet of Rafe's suit, the pearly tints of Adelaide's beautiful neck and arms, the glowing hue of Lal's unbound hair as it lay scattered over the coverlet.

"We none of us know the contents of your will," continued Rafe, "but if there is anything you want changed—"

The Colonel's eyes remained open, but a look of great agony entered them.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" exclaimed Aunt Marion; "if it isn't about the will it must be—it must be the estate. Is it, Donald, is it?"

Her husband's eyes closed. We looked at one another in utter consternation. Mrs. North was shaking noticeably. Rafe endeavored to calm her. Then he glanced at his father who was looking at him steadfastly with that same expression of concentrated suffering.

Rafe lowered his voice as he bent nearer his father to say:

"Have no anxiety about your affairs, father. I shall attend to all carefully. They shall not want."

He indicated us all with a motion of his head.

For the first time since our entrance the Colonel's face assumed a natural expression. His eyes rested gratefully upon his son. But ever mindful of the one who would need him most in the empty days to come, they wandered again to the bowed figure at his side.

Lal clung closer to him as she gazed steadily on his face.

"And Roy," she whispered, "when he comes back—if—if he does—he may stay, mayn't he, father? We have your consent to this?"

For a few moments her father's eyes remained fixed upon her. Slowly then they closed, opened again to gaze their last upon the pathetic face so dear to him, then closed again for aye.

And we knew it was Death.

A cry from Mrs. North was the first audible sound to make us realize she was now a widow. I went nearer Lal to raise her gently from her father's body. The movement disarranged his coat. It fell away from his side and a wilted piece of rosemary dropped to the floor. It was the bit Lal had given him early that evening. I stooped to pick it up, reviving it with my tears as I did so.

Without a word Lal took it from my hands. Stifling her sobs against its still fragrant leaves she left the room.

CHAPTER VII

Letters of condolence poured in upon us during those days before the interment. Colonel North had been much beloved and his friends were legion. We continued to receive letters after his burial from people we had never known, though a little thought on the part of Aunt Marion generally recalled the fact that Uncle Donald had mentioned their names at some time or other.

I attended to all the correspondence during the time immediately following Uncle Donald's death. This had been Lal's self-imposed task and one in which she gloried. I never knew another case where anyone had such a mania for writing and receiving letters as she had. I never knew her to miss a day at the postoffice. Inclement weather made no difference. At all hours she would haunt the building. It was the usual thing to see her drop whatever she was doing when she heard the whistle of the mail train at the station. It was fully three-quarters of a mile to the postoffice, but she always walked it and woe to the one of us who tried to get ahead of her by driving or wheeling over!

But with her father's death Lal temporarily fell into an apathy from which nothing could arouse her. During the

two days prior to interment she never once left the room in which the body lay. What food she ate was what I took to her, forcing her to eat it.

Mrs. North was prostrate in her own room, Rafe and Adelaide by her continually with the exception of the moments when Rafe was called upon to settle details. It therefore devolved upon me to attend to the ordinary every-day matters. I usually sent John for the mail when the first throes of our grief fell upon us.

The day after Uncle Donald was buried I went over to the postoffice myself. Rafe had gone to the city, Aunt Marion and Adelaide were sleeping and Lal was lying down in her room, her eyes staring up at the ceiling.

The house was so quiet and the day so beautiful that I felt the air would rejuvenate me. Besides, I knew I should see Howell most likely. I hadn't seen him since the night of the *bal masque* and I wanted to be near him and feel the comfortable touch of his hand again. He hadn't sent cards like the others for the simple reason he had none, but he had written me the sweetest letter of sympathy a girl ever received.

I took the short cut, going through the grape arbor along the edge of the lake, intending to vault the wall that enclosed the park, as I usually did. This was a favorite haunt of mine and it was rarely if ever frequented by the others. It was too shady, canopied as it almost was by the grape vines arching overhead, and the ground was always damp.

Obstacle three lay in the fact that a very large maple tree had in a storm been struck by lightning and with its branches sprawled across the narrow path. It was a mighty awkward step for petticoats, but I never was disturbed by the huge obstruction. I could vault it as well as the wall further on. I seldom had to do this, however. It was Howell's and my rendezvous, and his strong, salt-sinewed arms could lift me over like a child.

I was thinking of Howell and how hard it was that Aunt

Marion so looked down upon him, refusing him permission to call, when a sudden turn in the path brought me face to face with the lad himself seated astride of the great tree and ornamenting it freely with his jack knife.

I paused abruptly and my heart gave the first throb of hope it had known since I had known Howell. For it was reasonable to suppose that when Howell went to our rendezvous of his own free will, and not by appointment, he must have been thinking of me.

It was known only to ourselves, but nevertheless it was a matter of deep sorrow to me that Howell cared for me only in a friendly way. But he was trying hard to make his friendship for me deepen into something sweeter—how hard he was trying I never knew until afterwards.

He looked up now, as I reached his side, in the chivalrous way which so won everyone.

"Why, Peggy, I didn't expect to see you here," he said, springing lightly over the log and looking at me with tender sympathy alight in his eyes.

"Is that the reason you came?"

My light manner relieved him of any awkwardness he might have felt because of my bereavement.

"Father went over to Point-'O-Woods without me. He took Frank instead. He says he can't manage the craft as well as I. He's got to serve his apprenticeship as I did."

"So you came here for recreation?"

I sat down on the tree and Howell leaned against it.

"No—not exactly that," and his grave eyes deepened; "but I couldn't help thinking—"

"Not of me, Howell, surely?" and I looked up suddenly to smile reassuringly.

"Yes, of you. Why not? I think of you quite—yes, very often, Peggy." He looked at me half reproachfully as he said it.

"What an admission—for you."

He turned his head away. I saw that he was annoyed and touched his arm.

"Don't be vexed," I said, watching the curling lashes that so tried my self-control; "we've all been feeling so terribly, and I—"

A rush of tears at the thought of the kind friend I had lost prevented further speech. Howell was tender hearted above all things, and because of this and not because he loved me—for he did not—he made a half caressing movement. How gladly I would have dared to take advantage of it and accept this sympathy for love, none but I can know. But I resolutely put the temptation by and drew back.

"That's unfair," I said; "you must not lead me to believe you love me, Howell, when you know as well as I that nothing but sheerest pity prompts this attitude."

He grew red around the crinkly roots of his dark hair. I suppose my blunt speech was accountable for it, but I was never anything but painfully frank with him.

"I hope I shall never lead you to believe anything that is untrue, Peggy," he said with evident effort; "it isn't your fault or mine that I can't love you as—as you love me, but perhaps, some day—"

He broke off as he always had to when he came to that, "perhaps—some day."

I couldn't be disagreeable in the face of such heroic efforts to give me what I gave him, unasked, and I supplemented:

"In the meantime we are the best of friends, aren't we, Howell?"

"Indeed we are, Peggy. You are the firmest I have, I know. And there isn't a girl anywhere I like better than you. You know that, too, don't you?"

"I have your word for it, Howell. I have never doubted that, yet." I looked up at him and he said gently:

"Your eyes are shining, Peggy. They are as pretty a pair as ever fellow looked into. I wish they could thrill me the way Edith's once did."

Edith was the only girl Howell had ever loved, but he

had gotten bravely and safely over it. I knew I need never fear on that score.

"You mustn't turn facts into compliments," I said as I met his eyes now, without wavering. "I'll begin to doubt you if you do."

"Compliment?" he replied, laughing his rich laugh; "compliments are for the beautiful, the pretty women. I keep truth for you."

"I believe I was on my way to the postoffice when you rose in my path like the lion you are—at heart," I said, as I scrambled over the tree, Howell following suit, but with greater ease; "and the sun will be setting before I get there at this rate."

"It is just possible that I can see you home," was the answer to my observation; "your aunt can't object to the simple courtesy any gentleman should show you."

"She will not be thinking of me to-day."

"It must have been a terrible shock."

"It has been awful. But we all bear it naturally except Lal. Adelaide and Aunt Marion can cry, but she can't. I am watching very anxiously as to how this will affect her."

"Don't worry. She'll find something to engross her and take her mind off of it."

We had reached the stone wall.

Howell vaulted it and turned to lift me over. I couldn't help smiling at him. He looked so handsome. And just at that moment a carriage passed containing two of our neighbors. They looked at us in a shocked, scandalized fashion.

"It will be common rumor in the village to-morrow that I was seen clearing this wall with your assistance," I said.

"With a smile on your lips and your uncle not in his grave twenty-four hours. That is the way people talk and ever will talk, Peggy. But learn never to mind them."

"I hope not," I answered briefly; "I suppose there will be comment galore about our non-observance of mourning. But Uncle Donald hated dark clothes. He often made

Aunt Marion promise she would never wear mourning for him nor allow us to."

As we neared the postoffice I said:

"I can't help what people think, Howell. And I can't think that Uncle Don would be miserable if he knew how much better I feel now that the more immediate gloom has been lifted. I am almost light-hearted now. And I wasn't when I left the house this afternoon. I felt only a sense of relief then."

CHAPTER VIII

There were a great many letters in our box when we entered the postoffice. I casually counted eleven as we turned to walk out again.

"Any for you?" asked Howell as with the prerogative I accorded him he glanced over my shoulder to read the addresses.

"I hope so. Five for Aunt Marion—two for Adelaide, three for Rafe, and one for—me. None for Lal. Too bad. She loves to get them so. I had hoped I could take her one, for even this passing interest might rouse her."

"Who is yours from? Read it now if you like. I'll keep quiet."

"Thank you. It'll keep. It's from Mrs. Thorpe, my mother's friend. The postmark's New York, Mr. Curiosity."

"That reminds me, some of the New Yorkers at the ball the other night remained at the hotel till next morning. But they were charmed with our manners or customs or something and are here yet. They like the place so much I guess they'll make it their summer residence."

"Who are they?" I asked quickly.

"Mr. and Mrs. Marquarson are the two. A Mr. Danforth is the third. Why?"

"Who's Mr. Danforth?"

"I don't know. No one in particular. Some grain merchant, I think. He—"

"Are you sure?"

"Why, yes, but what difference? Did you meet him? Is he—"

"No, of course not. But, Howell, be careful. Are you sure Mr. Danforth is a grain merchant?"

"Cock sure. I looked his name up in the hotel register and buzzed the clerk. I had some business of my own with him. But why are you so curious?"

"Why—I thought it was some one else, that's all. I'm so relieved."

"Who did you think it was?" asked Howell, with sudden interest.

"Why, the—the—"

"That man in our set of lanciers that night? The actor?"

Howell was quite excited, for him.

"Ye—es," I admitted.

He laughed.

"Then he made an impression upon you as he did upon every other girl in the room?" he queried, watching me.

"I was interested for a particular reason," I answered; "he was fine looking, certainly, but not the kind of a man I admire."

And with utter sang-froid I looked at him meaningly.

Howell kicked a stone that lay in front of him.

"You say terribly embarrassing things, Peggy," he said; "I wish you wouldn't."

Abashed, I scarcely knew why, I did not talk any more beyond a "yes" or "no" to his remarks. When we reached the house I did not look at him as I said good-bye.

"If you'll come, I'll take you and Lal sailing to-morrow, or any day this week," he said, as I turned to go up the steps; "it may cheer Lal up."

He didn't include Adelaide in his invitation simply because she shared her mother's prejudice and disdain of him.

"I'll ask her. I don't think she'll care to, though," I answered as I went into the house.

Aunt Marion and Adelaide were still asleep. I left their letters on a table near their beds. Looking in upon Lal, I saw she had fallen into a semi-somnolent state. Then I went to my own room.

I thought of my letter and sat down in front of the grate fire to read it, for though the winter was really over the days were still chilly and we needed the warmth of blazing logs.

As I was about to open the envelope my eyes were more closely attracted by the handwriting. I saw that it was not that of Mrs. Thorpe, though similar enough to deceive me at first glance. This chirography was more masculine. Wondering, I hastily tore open the envelope. Enclosed was another envelope, sealed, bearing no superscription. I looked again into the envelope I had torn and drew forth a note. It could be called no more than that. Unfolding it, I hastily glanced at the signature.

To my amaze, quickly followed by breathless stupefaction, I read—*Yale Beresford.*

The actor!

And he had had the audacity to write to me. And why? The paper trembled in my hands as I read:

DEAR MISS KERSEY—

It is not asking too much, I hope, to beg you to see that the enclosed reaches Miss Lal. It is an unusual way in which to write to a lady, I acknowledge, but awkwardly enough I didn't know her last name. And I was fortunate enough to catch yours. If you ever come to the city, as I presume you do, let me know and I shall be pleased to send you tickets for a good performance.

Anticipating and thanking you for your kindness, I beg leave to remain,

Very truly yours,

YALE BERESFORD.

For a moment or two I could do nothing but read and reread the lines before me,

Then I stooped to pick up the unaddressed envelope which had fallen to the floor. I turned it over in my hand. What did it contain? I confess I yielded to the temptation of endeavoring to decipher the black writing through the back of the envelope. But I could distinguish no more than the name in bold letters.

What should I do? Give this letter, containing I knew not what nonsense, to my impetuous Lal, who, so strangely did she act at times to distract her mind from her sorrow, might be drawn into a useless, nay, even dangerous correspondence? Certainly not.

Send it back? I argued this a moment, weighing the pros and cons. If I did and the man should not accept the slight as final? He had audacity enough to write again or even— I wondered if he ever would appear in Nineveh again. It would be awkward for me if he and Lal should ever meet. But there was slight chance of this. If they did—well, I could explain matters. At least I would try.

At present it was simply imperative that Lal should not receive this letter. I had a very lively curiosity as to the contents, but nothing would have prevailed upon me to open it. With some trepidation, but with no compunction whatever, I laid the letter upon the blazing coals.

A spurt, a whish, a flame and there was nothing to show that such an epistle had ever been tangible. I watched the fiery spot where I laid my own note, reflectively.

"Ah! Mr. Yale Beresford, keep your wiles for city girls, the matinee girls who adore you," I said to myself; "Lal is not like these. She is not for you. Your paths lie far apart."

CHAPTER IX

It soon became evident that Colonel North had left his family in very straitened circumstances. Rafe made a supreme effort to keep the details from his mother, but it was useless. Matters had gone too far, money was so slow in forthcoming.

Mrs. North was not a woman to willfully blind herself to anything disagreeable. She insisted upon knowing fully the extent of her resources. It was a terrible shock to us all when we realized just where we stood. Importuned by his mother, Rafe told her all—the truth which he had half suspected himself.

The house was mortgaged to the roof; the land on which we lived, the very furniture in the house, was not our own, but sold to make good the losses incurred by the Colonel in stocks.

And what had prompted this disastrous speculation? When I saw exquisite jewels lying on Mrs. North's dressing table it needed no one to tell me.

There was a family conclave. But definite results were difficult to reach. Through pure courtesy and humanity on the part of our chief creditor we were to be given the use of the house till fall. Then what were we to do? What way to turn was our query. We discussed the matter in all its phases.

"A good marriage is the only thing left open for you girls that I can see," said Aunt Marion as we sat in grave conference the Sunday after Uncle Donald's burial; "that is every woman's field. It's a legitimate business and every woman is bound to make the most of her opportunities."

"Else she's a born fool," interposed Rafe. "Laura, you should lead off. You're the eldest of you girls."

Lal was sitting in the embrasure of the window as Rafe spoke. The only evidence she gave that she knew he had

spoken was a more concentrated observation of the dogs frolicking in the driveway.

"Of course Adelaide will do well," pursued Mrs. North; "beauty, after all, attracts men most, and Addie is bound to make a good match. Then there are some men who prefer a bright woman to a pretty woman, not that Adelaide isn't bright, but Laura talks better. Of course we all know that, but if you do as well as Adelaide, Laura, you'll have reason to congratulate yourself."

Adelaide sat back in her chair with an air of conscious superiority wreathing her lips.

"I shall certainly never marry a man who cannot give me most of the things I ask for," she said with emphasis.

"Then there's Margaret," continued Aunt Marion; "you'll be the little homebody, won't you? You're such a quiet, demure little thing you won't attract the same men as Laura and Addie. After the girls are settled some good man will want you for his wife, perhaps, and you'll make a sensible marriage. Somehow I always expect you to marry a widower, Margaret. Some grave, middle-aged man with three or four young children."

"A very inviting prospect," I murmured, "but I should prefer them to be my own."

Lal turned from the window during the silence ensuing my remark. She looked at her mother in the awful, unconcerned way she had at times.

"And will you marry to lift the fallen fortunes of this house, too?" she asked in a studiedly respectful tone.

Mrs. North sprang up from where she was lying on the lounge and looked around at Lal with one of those cold glances she called into use so often.

"Why, what do you mean?" she demanded; "what a horrible thing for you to say! And your father not cold in his grave yet!"

"It was only a speculation," said Lal, unmoved; "I don't imagine such a contingency yet. But as long as you were mapping out our courses I thought you would mention yours too."

"I don't teach you to be impertinent, young woman. You have no consideration for my feelings. Absolutely none at all."

Mrs. North fell back upon the couch with a snort half of anger, half of martyred resignation.

"I never saw anyone who could say such cold-blooded things as you when you choose," said Rafe, with an indignant glance at Lal as he drew his chair beside his mother.

"You have seen so many people," his sister observed pityingly, "your judgment is so competent."

Matters were looking ominous, as they always did when Lal adopted that tone.

"Oh, don't," I entreated; "how can you quarrel like this? You know it always worried Uncle Don to hear you two bandy words."

"Laura's got to learn that she can't carry things with the high hand she did with father," said Rafe, with the air of one addressing a convention.

"It'll not be from you," retorted Lal; "I'll learn nothing from you, whatever I do."

"I wouldn't be teacher to such a spit-fire," returned Rafe, lapsing into his favorite assertion; "now keep quiet or go out of the room. I want to talk to mother."

"Don't ask impossibilities, Rafe," here interposed Adelaide with malice in her eyes.

"You shallow mischief-maker," said Lal, contemptuously, looking at her; "I believe you were born to make trouble and create dissension."

"What do you think you were born for? Something great, of course. That must always be your private opinion of yourself," Adelaide remarked, with rising irritation.

"What have I done to deserve such quarrelsome children?" asked Mrs. North, wearily, from her couch; "won't you cease this?"

Adelaide approached the lounge and bent over her mother, while Rafe affectionately pinched her arm.

"I'll be good, mompsus," she said in the wheedling,

child-like tone she could assume and which invariably won her mother; "so will Rafe. I can't speak for others."

"Was that young Cole who called to see you last night?" asked Mrs. North as she scanned Adelaide's face in the peculiarly speculative way she had.

"Yes. He wanted me to go sailing with him to-morrow."

"His people are very wealthy," said Mrs. North tentatively.

"His yacht is a beauty," enthusiastically from Rafe; "I saw it yesterday in the Bay. It had just come down from New York."

"You could do much worse, Addie," said her mother; "he is the only child, you know."

"I think he is hard hit," was the reply with a little laugh; "but I shall take all summer to consider him in."

"Don't be too sure of him. It doesn't do to be too sure of a man. They need constant watching."

"I wish to place myself on record," said Lal, standing squarely in the center of the room and speaking in that unusual voice of hers; "so kindly listen attentively. I do not intend to marry. I shall never marry for a home or for the sake of being supported, as so many do. It is degradation."

"You prefer to be supported by your relatives," suggested Adelaide with her characterless laugh.

"I shall support myself," Lal went on, ignoring the interpolation; "in what way I have not quite made up my mind yet. But I shall do it."

The corners of her fine mouth grew firm as she spoke.

Mrs. North flushed a vivid red.

"Go out and work for your living!" she ejaculated; "any girl can do that! But it isn't every girl who can catch a husband."

A look of disgust spread rapidly over Lal's expressive face. She walked up and down the room a few minutes before she spoke.

"I have never been able to look upon the species man as legitimate prey; as fish, flesh or fowl—to be caught," she said; " a man, like a woman, must be won by individual charm."

"A fine theory," answered her mother, "but like all your theories, impracticable. People don't marry for 'individual charm.' When they do, they regret it to the last day of their lives. People marry for betterment of position or circumstances, now. Respect is a good enough basis for two to marry on."

"Your market value as a self-supporting person is nil," said Rafe; "what can you do?"

This was too much for me. Lal, with all her varied talents, to be asked what she could do!

"What can she do?" I blazed out, glaring at Rafe; "are you blind, Rafe North? What can she do? Better ask, What can't she do. Why, everyone knows her great talents. She has more ability in one corner of her brain than you'll ever have over the whole area of yours!"

"Margaret, you are forgetting yourself," said Aunt Marion in her severest voice, as her hold of Rafe's hand instinctively tightened.

Lal laid her cool palm over my mouth.

"You are too zealous a partisan, Peggy," she said with one of her illumined smiles; "don't you know one's relatives never rate one at one's right value?"

"What do you think your father would say?" demanded Mrs. North, looking at Lal challengingly; "the idea of your going out to work—a girl with the position you have and with the full, brilliant chance of a far better one! What do you think your father would say?"

"My father never looked upon honorable work as ignoble—even for women," said Lal, returning her mother's glance; "I shall never do anything of which my father would not have approved—had he lived."

"It doesn't matter about your mother at all," said Mrs. North with a sniff; "it never did."

"You and I are not in sympathy, mother. What need to discuss something so well known."

"I hope you'll always find people as forbearing toward you as your mother has been."

Mrs. North was emitting several desultory sighs. Adelaide smoothed her forehead.

"Don't worry, mompsus. We all know what Lal is," she whispered, but loud enough for the rest of us to hear.

"Your poor, benighted intellect must be improving daily to be able to know so fully."

Lal stopped as she spoke by the lounge and measured her sister with a glance.

"Of course you realize your family is entitled to a consideration of your plans," observed Rafe, seeing the fire in Lal's eyes and trying to avert a passage of arms between her and Adelaide.

"My plans are my own until I choose to mention them."

"Oh! very well. Only when you want help you'll probably assume a different attitude," was Rafe's rejoinder.

"When I want help, rely upon it, I'll not apply to you."

The antagonism in the atmosphere was becoming more marked. It was always so. I felt that an open rupture would occur presently. I arose, looking at Lal.

"It is beautiful out. I am going down by the lake. Won't you come?"

"Just to accommodate you," she answered, as we left the others.

CHAPTER X

We went down to the small lake bordering the estate we had once loved to call ours and which was now the property of strangers. The skiff we always used was not in the boat house. It had been left out over night and being untied had drifted over to the other shore among the bushes.

"It will take too much time for John to get it. We can't get it ourselves," said Lal; "let's walk over to the Bay."

"But it's Sunday—and so warm," I remonstrated.

"What nonsense! Sunday! You've taken the walk before on the Sabbath and gone sailing, too, for that matter. As for the heat—that's a matter of opinion."

"Well, my opinion as regards this weather is that it is one of the warmest days we've had so far," I asserted.

"I am unusually cool," said Lal serenely; "can't you feel the sweet dampness from these grape vines?"

We were walking desultorily along beneath the arbor now, and I realized as usual that Lal's dominating spirit would cause me to yield in the end.

"Come, Peggy, no objections now. It's so tiresome to have people object. Hasn't there been enough opposition to-day? Heavens! but the air was charged with little black devils while we were all talking a while ago. Why do you suppose Rafe and Adelaide and mother irritate me so? You never do."

"Well, you are not in sympathy with them," I began lamely, "and you don't try very hard to—"

"Yes, I do. I do," interrupted Lal with her customary vehemence; "or, rather, past tense, I did. I did try, day after day, to ignore Rafe's derogatory remarks, Adelaide's insolence, mother's eternal nagging. But I couldn't do that unless I were a stoic. And I'm not that. God knows I am not that, though they've tried hard enough to make me one."

"Don't you think you are becoming embittered?" I ventured. "You can't judge dispassionately if you are that, you know."

"I'm not judging. I only know I am sick and weary of all this one-sidedness, this never-ending dissension. It's got to end soon."

As she spoke, Lal set her teeth. I looked at her fearfully, though I was accustomed to these outbreaks. Even when her father lived there had been unhappiness and mis-

understandings, though not in his presence. It was no unusual thing for me to run across my wretched girl in the skiff under some drooping willows, her face buried in the cushions, her eyes hot and burning, and dry sobs shaking her whole frame.

Whenever I found her thus it was a stormy time, for Lal would rave and threaten, vowing to leave home never to return, that she hated everything and everybody, generally concluding by bathing her face in the lake, bidding me take the oars and steering to the water lily district, where she would pluck up the heavy scented things by the score and throw them about the boat in picturesque confusion.

I had ceased to dread these outbursts. I no longer feared she would carry her threats of leaving home into execution. But it made my heart ache to see the expression which was settling in her eyes and around her mouth.

"Perhaps we could get Dr. Breeze's influence for you to teach the school in the village," I suggested now, hoping to turn her thoughts into another channel; "you know he is on the Board of Education. That would occupy you, and Aunt Marion couldn't object—"

She interrupted me with a scornful gesture.

"I shall never begin a life work, a life struggle for my maintenance in a village like this. I shall make my beginning in the city, even if I am reduced to the necessity to going out as a housemaid. Teaching school? Why, Peggy, are you bereft of your senses? I would no more have the patience to teach the little dunderpates hereabouts than—"

She broke off and laughed her long, trilling laugh which had the power to stir my heartstrings.

"What will you do then?" I questioned, though not in doubt; "but you'll have no difficulty in getting a position in almost any branch. As a music teacher, a vocal instructor, a newspaper woman, a public reader—"

"Or an actress," she interpolated.

I looked at her quickly. I could feel myself shriveling up inside at the bare suggestion.

"No, no; not that," I hastened to say. I thought of the actor, Yale Beresford, and her narrow escape from knowing him. "Anything, Lallie, but that. Don't ever think of it, will you, will you? Promise me."

I was surprised at my outward excitement, but my inward trembling justified it.

Lal looked at me curiously. She laughed a little.

"Why, I had no idea you were such a little Puritan," she said; "you are fond of the theater, too. Why, when we go to the city and see a performance you are almost as enthusiastic as I. What's the difference? If I were to become an actress—"

"Oh, it is different—very different," I broke in eagerly, "for one of your temperament, too. You—"

"Afraid of my going to pieces morally? Never fear, Peggy. I have no inclination for a dissolute life." And though she spoke lightly I saw her color heighten.

"It's not that," I hastened to say, knowing I was refuting the very thought that had entered my head and casting wildly around for some other excuse; "but your physique—you couldn't stand it. The late hours, you know. The irregular meals, the rough travel—"

I stopped helpless before her searching gaze.

"You know you are thinking other than these things, Peggy," she said calmly; "but you know, I don't mind. I don't let things people say affect me."

She often said this, so I was not more than usually disturbed by it.

"But," she continued, "the chances of my becoming an actress are very remote. It needs influence more than any other profession, to get even the start now. Ah! Peggy, you did that well," for I had vaulted the fallen maple in our pathway. "It tells a tale, though. How many times have you traversed this veritable lover's promenade with Howell to teach you efficiency in the gymnastic line?"

"Howell doesn't teach me gymnastics."

"Some other art, then."

"No—unless self-repression be an art."

"Self-repression?"

"Yes. Self-repression. How terrible it is to keep any emotion in check, Lal."

She shot one of her quick, sympathetic glances at me. It was more to me than the gentlest words would have been from anyone else.

"Restraint is always a severe teacher, but a necessary one. But I doubt if I make a practice of calling her to hand. What emotion are you keeping in check, Peggy?"

"Love."

"For Howell? Why—aren't things all right between you? You have not quarreled?"

"No. We have never done that. We never will. We are too good friends to quarrel."

"Good friends?"

Lal's narrow eyebrows went up a moment as she met my eyes. "That's always a suspicious state for lovers."

"But we are not lovers, Lal."

She stopped in the roadway which we were traversing now. She looked at me incredulously.

"But—it's common report," she began; "you are seen together often. Howell—there's no other girl, is there?"

"No."

"And you—why, Peggy, you've told me often how you care for him."

"Have you never heard of unreciprocated love, my dear?"

I spoke lightly, but a more stupid girl than Lal would not have been deceived.

"He doesn't care for you? Where are his eyes? What queer notions men take! Don't grieve, Peggy," she looked at me tenderly, "you're not grieving, are you?"

"Howell and I have talked it over so many times and he's so sweet about it I can't help hoping he will care for me some day, the way I care for him," I replied; "it's an odd state of affairs. There's no other girl he cares for and he is

trying hard to love me. But love isn't a forced plant. As sweet as it is, it is like a weed in its tumultuous growth."

"Little philosopher!" laughed Lal, "how well you have conned your lesson!"

We were passing the little row of houses a few rods from the Bay where Howell, his father and brother and the other owners of the craft upon the Bay lived. Lal and I looked at the unpretentious little domiciles simultaneously. At that moment Howell came around from the rear entrance of his home. He seemed surprised to see us. I thought he had good reason. At the same time I knew no such thought troubled Lal.

"No one engaged father to-day," said Howell, glancing from me to Lal. "I was going out for a little sail. Will you come. Or—"

"Indeed we will," answered Lal before I could remonstrate audibly; "it's a perfect day. On the water it will be ideal. Isn't that air a benediction?"

She sniffed the breeze, sweeping toward us laden with the pungent smell of clam and seaweed, with the delight of one who has long been denied freedom.

"We ought to send back word to the house," I observed as I weakly filed behind my two companions in the narrow path we took to avoid the muddy road; "Aunt Marion—"

"—will not worry," said Lal promptly; "she has Rafe and Adelaide to engross her for the afternoon. We will be back by six and no questions will be asked. If there are, leave me to answer them. Look there! Isn't she pretty? Why, Howell, she has a new coat of paint."

"Yes. I finished the last coating yesterday. I thought I would be taking out you two soon. She's as pretty a little craft as any on the Bay."

Howell's face beamed with justifiable pride. With the combined savings of himself and father he had consummated the purchase but a few months previous which had made the pretty catboat their joint property. The boat had not been in the most perfect condition when bought from its former

owner, but with some dexterous workmanship and really artistic touches from Howell there had been effected quite a transformation.

"It's almost equal to Morton Cole's," said Lal, "only his is a yacht."

"They are not comparable for an instant," I ejaculated, with prejudiced emphasis; "Howell's boat is so trim and dainty."

Morton Cole's stately yacht was just then being freed from her pinions at the wharf side. He did not see us as we approached the pier some yards removed from him to where Howell's *Halcyon* lay moored.

"He has quite a party in tow," said Lal, watching him with thoughtful eyes; "does he always take along such a large supply of wine?" turning to Howell.

"Wine?" I repeated, wheeling from my anticipated position of boarding the *Halcyon* and glaring at the laughing party at our right; "you are mistaken, surely."

"No, she isn't," was Howell's response as he helped me over the side of the boat; "he is out every day and the bottles taken on board never diminish in number."

I stood aghast in the stern of the boat looking at the great baskets of bottles being carried aboard young Cole's yacht.

"Adelaide must know this," I gasped, "and to-night."

"It will make such a tremendous difference," said Lal as she tripped into the boat, disdaining Howell's proffered hand.

"She can't ignore it. If she does, Aunt Marion will use judgment. Who are those girls? I never saw them before."

I looked at Howell questioningly. He was stooping to get a coil of rope from under the seat along the side of the boat. He did not reply. His face was flushed with the exertion, but I couldn't understand how this should make him render me no reply. I repeated my question, and then saw that Lal was making faces at me.

But Howell looked at me now, his natural color restored. He met my eyes chivalrously as he stood before me straight and tall in the summer's sun. When I remembered his attitude afterward I could think of nothing but Sir Galahad of the Round Table.

"They are women I wouldn't care for you to know, Peggy," he said in a low tone.

Then he leaped to the cabin's roof and moved away from us to adjust the sail.

CHAPTER XI

"We are defying propriety," I said, as the brisk breeze carried us out into the Bay.

"Who cares?" from Lal; "whoever follows propriety is doomed to forfeit happiness."

"Not happiness, Lal; pleasure," I mildly corrected. "How often they are confounded!"

"Happiness is contentment. Pleasure is—for fools," she answered with one of her introspective looks; "those who seek for pleasure forget the day of reckoning. The end of the road of pleasure is hell. The end of the road of happiness is heaven."

"What is your idea of happiness?" asked Howell, looking quizzically at her.

"Will you tell me yours?" she demanded, watching him.

"Certainly," came from Howell so unreservedly that I trembled.

"And you, Peggy?"

"The discussion is between you and Howell. I am only an auditor," I answered hastily.

"Therefore excused. Well, my friend with the curling lashes," smiling contemplatively at Howell as he deprecated the phrase, "my idea of happiness is so vast, so varied,

that I'm afraid in its entirety it would asphyxiate you. Boiled to an essence—"

"You're guying me," said Howell, flushing.

"What an accusation! Hear me out, oh, wise young Daniel, ere you bring so base a charge against me! Suspend—"

"Lal!" I remonstrated, "be sensible. Howell gave you his promise in good faith. What is your idea of happiness? I should really like to know."

She leaned back among the cushions with which Howell had surrounded her at the start and let her hand dabble alongside the boat in the water as she gazed upwards at the cloudless sky.

The look of sadness which never wholly left her face at any time deepened.

"My idea of happiness," she murmured in the thrilling tones which so moved the casual listener, "not love, not even love perfected, devoid of every shred of passion which mars all human love. There is something higher, something better than that. *The knowledge of having accomplished the best, the truest part of the task one set out to do.* That is my idea of happiness."

There was a silence while her words filtered through the great stillness around us. I looked at her with a keen pain at my heart. Oh, my great-hearted girl, with all your human weaknesses, will you live up to your ideals? Will you find your happiness in this, your glowing, youthful idea? Or will you miss it?

"It is a lofty ambition, a high idea of happiness," I said, breaking in upon her reverie, "may you win it, dear."

She looked up in my face with one of her illumined smiles. Then her eyes roamed to Howell and back to me again.

"And your idea of happiness, Peggy, whatever it is, you deserve to realize it. I hope you may. Come, Howell, I'm not going to let you off. You promised, you know. Of what will your highest happiness consist?"

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Howell's blue eyes scanned the water around us. I did not dare look at him openly. Not that for a moment did I dream his gaze would rest upon me as he voiced his idea of happiness. But I feared to let him meet my eyes. He would have read the same old story in them, the love and desire of my heart. And I dreaded to make this a repetition to him.

Lal's contralto tones penetrated the stillness again.

"Come, 'fess. Your chief idea of happiness, Howell?"

"It's soon said. To be the master of an ocean steamer," Howell responded, with such simple directness I couldn't repress a smile.

Lal laughed unrestrainedly.

"A modest wish," she said; "I was expecting something entirely different."

"It'll be years before I attain my happiness," said Howell, almost gloomily for him, "if I do then."

"It is years for all of us—for all who work for it," came from Lal in the grave manner which was hers so often, "it wouldn't be well if we won early. Well, good luck to you, Captain. Your nature is nautical enough to justify a reasonable amount of prophecy. But branch out, Howell. Don't stay in this village or your dream of captaincy will end in smoke."

"Not yet." Howell's voice was firm. "I believe in letting things take their own course."

"I don't," promptly from Lal; "shape your own life. Make things go the way you choose. Otherwise you live in grooves. And what comes from living in grooves? Mediocrity. And what is worse than mediocrity?"

We passed a number of pleasure parties on the way to Thor's Island. This Island was about ten miles from Nineveh. A catboat containing Florence Westlake and a number of other rather familiar friends sailed swiftly by. The occupants called out to us. But the wind blew their sentences in another direction.

"They must be sailing for the Island," I said,

"Yes, but they usually cruise up and down the coast," answered Howell; "it's pleasant work eddying in and out of the cliffs along the beach."

"Did you know that there is a palmist at the Island now?" queried Lal as she rose from her recumbent attitude to make one of her swift glances of the horizon.

"What of that?" I asked, well divining her intention.

"She's a celebrated one and has told the most wonderful things with astonishing accuracy to some of the girls. Miriam Greyson had her whole past laid as bare as a bald man's head recently. And Miriam's past has been an enviable one in point of experience, you know."

"Well?" I demanded, as Howell laughed at my assumed ignorance of the thought being harbored in Lal's brain.

"Well?" she mimicked, with a grimace, "I am going to have my future made known to me. My past doesn't amount to a row of pins. But perhaps—"

"It's rubbish," I said emphatically, and Howell nodded his affirmation to my statement.

"It's truth, palmistry is," declared Lal, "and I shall prove it to you to-day. You have always had a deep-rooted objection to the science, Peggy. But I'll show you how narrow people are who do not give it their respectful admiration."

"But not to-day," I remonstrated; "it's the Sabbath. Haven't you any instinct of reverence?"

"Certainly I have. But I can't be reverent on the Sabbath simply because it is the Sabbath. I'd rather have my religion by moods. It's more comforting in the end. And do you know, Peggy, it isn't wrong to enjoy yourself quietly on Sunday. It's a day of rest, isn't it? The only way for me to rest is to take a recreation. Of course this rule doesn't apply to everyone. You needn't have your hand read. Leave that to me and turn your attention to reading—Howell's eyes."

She grinned at me unmindful of the hot waves of color leaping to my cheeks. Howell was slacking sail with a face

as impassive as a judge. Had I not been at the tiller I would have silenced her with a cushion.

When the *Halcyon* had been secured to the wharf at Thor's Island we passed along the beach up through one of the wooded paths leading into the juvenile forest of which the Island boasted. Sign posts along our route pointed the way to Madame Chacot, the Wonderful Palmist.

A shrewd-looking woman outside the tent passed us on inside. The palmist sat at a table whereon burned a light covered by a blue shade. She was a woman of refined appearance, though I thought I detected evidences of negro blood in her. Her face remained perfectly expressionless as Lal said she wished her hands read, but her friends merely desired to listen to the reading.

I could not repress a movement of interest, incredulous as I was, as the woman took up Lal's two little hands and gazed intently at them for some moments without speaking. When she looked up it was with eyes that roved questioningly over Lal's whole person. She hesitated, though this was barely perceptible. Then she asked:

"Are you a professional?"

Lal shook her head.

"You will be, then," said the woman undaunted, bending closer over the network of lines I had often noticed on Lal's palms myself; "it's written here unmistakably."

I made an involuntary movement forward.

"What profession?" I demanded so sharply that the woman looked at me with a keen quickness.

Then she turned to Lal again.

"Do you wish me to speak unreservedly?" she queried.

"Certainly," was the response.

I could see Lal's attention was vividly centered upon the face before her.

"It is the dramatic profession," the palmist continued, without raising her eyes again; "there is a strong indication of the love of, and executive ability in, all the other arts, but the temperament is so emotional the outlet will be the

drama. There is the promise of a brilliant career here—" she paused and her brows contracted. I leaned forward as if listening to Gospel truth. "But be careful. The lines from the Mount of the Sun are strongly influenced by the line of the heart. They are almost interwoven. Be watchful of your affections. You—"

"Shall I meet with success—independence—through my own exertions?" interrupted Lal in a suppressed voice.

"Oh, yes."

Lal's look of relief pained me inexpressibly. I could not bear to think of that fragile body with its busy brain working unceasingly—as I knew she would—for the aim and glory of her life—independence.

"You will earn your own bread," pursued the palmist; "you will consume all your vitality if you are not careful; you ought to be extraordinarily successful, but—"

A crash of music from one of the tents in the series of canvases which stretched around the clearing in the wood caused the palmist to stop in the middle of a sentence. Lal's face lightened as she inclined her head toward the adjoining tent.

"Listen! It's the grand march from Leonore—Raff's," she said, her eyes sparkling; "how majestically it is played."

"It is my daughter," the palmist answered, and the note of pride in her voice was strong; "she is an artiste. Joseffy was here with a party one day. He heard her play. He said she had the touch. But she is more than an artiste. She was born with a caul. She possesses second sight."

The palmist's face, which had impressed me as rather inexpressive than otherwise, now glowed as if it had been rubbed with phosphorescence.

"She certainly possesses music in her soul," said Lal; "I don't know about her second sight powers, of course. Have you finished the reading?"

"No. There is much in your hand."

She took up Lal's palms again and proceeded to give a most minute and accurate description of her nature. She

mentioned side phases I would have thought it impossible for anyone save myself to have known. She dwelt upon her inconsistencies, spoke fervently of what she termed her "inward power," and described her character as if she had known it for years.

Lal laughed as Howell laid some silver on the table.

"How well you have told it," she exclaimed, with frank courtesy to the palmist; "you must admit the truth of my present if you won't grant the future, Peggy."

"It is certainly wonderful," I admitted. "What is it?" I asked of the palmist, for she had suddenly risen.

"Listen!" she said with a gesture that was well-nigh authoritative, "that's the Moonlight Sonata. Now wait. It means something. You'll see. Can't you feel the undertone? There's always something back of Meena when she plays like that."

It was really too beautiful. I saw that Howell already was entranced, and I was losing my composure under the suggestions of the sobbing tones. As for Lal, she looked as if she were under a spell. She had sunk down upon a settee and with her head leaning against the side of the tent gave the impression that she was under hypnotic influence.

Perfect silence held the four of us. The mournful tones of Beethoven's soul-stirring composition were brought out with a power I have never since heard equaled. As the palmist said, "there seemed something back of it," a mystery, a magic that portended a revelation, almost. To the last note was our strained attention fixed.

There was barely a moment's interim between the final note and the slow sweeping aside of the red curtain between the two tents as a young woman was disclosed to our view. She was very pale, and her jet hair, in its smooth blackness, emphasized the pallor of her skin, drawn away as it was from her forehead in tight folds. Her eyes centered themselves instantly upon Lal's listening face. She moved with unconscious grace toward her, and to my growing wonder laid a hand upon Lal's bright hair.

"It was this one," she said, speaking in concentrated

tones, "this one whose nature was laid bare now. I knew it."

As the palmist murmured "right," under her breath, she went on, "Something told me. Oh!" drawing back and regarding the flower-like face before her, "it is the type of those who suffer. But you can be warned in time. How shall I warn you?"

She covered her eyes with her hand a moment.

Howell made a barely noticeable movement toward the door. I saw that he was disgusted. I was growing skeptical myself, confessing that what I might have believed in the palmist's statements was gradually being dispelled by this later demonstration. It smacked strongly of clairvoyance, and I felt a rising indignation.

"Get Lal away from here," whispered Howell; "she is ready to believe anything that bunko woman will tell her."

Before I had an opportunity to interpose, the palmist's daughter was bending over Lal.

"It is the music," she said, "it is a symbol. Bear it in mind. You will hear the Sonata played again, away from here, not by me, by some other. And *wherever you hear the Moonlight Sonata beware of the circumstances attending it.* It is the key note. The Sonata will be the key note of your life."

Lal rose as with an effort. She looked around dreamily.

"Is it true?" she questioned vaguely, moving toward me with unseeing eyes; "Oh, Peggy, do you think it is true?"

"You are growing hysterical, dear," I answered gently; "come, we must go now."

"Are there any other charges?" asked Howell as we moved toward the tent door.

There was a sarcastic ring to his voice.

The young woman drew herself up proudly. There was actually a grandeur in her movement.

"I do not use my Heaven-sent gift of second sight for gain," she answered.

"Heaven-sent Tommy-rot," muttered Howell as we got safely past the avenue of box that led to the tents; "what

could have prevented her from peeking through the curtain and seeing for herself it was Lal's hands her mother was investigating? And she palms it off as second sight! Bah! I haven't an overplus of brains, but I wouldn't let that drivel muddle me."

This was a slur at Lal's credulity, and I resented it. I was about to set forth indignantly that Lal's belief, whatever it was, was quite as open to respect as the belief of anyone else, when we heard a shout behind us.

We turned and I wondered to see the palmist's figure come running toward us. She paused, panting for breath, in front of Lal, utterly ignoring Howell and me.

A crash of music from the piano back in the tent was borne down the path to us. It seemed to be an improvised prelude to something which promised to be soothing.

"Don't be dissuaded from believing what my daughter told you," she said, with almost painful eagerness, looking intently at Lal; "she knows. She understands. She has the gift of second sight. Remember what she told you. Remember the Sonata, and oh! be warned in time! She spoke true words. You are the type that suffers."

She turned and abruptly hurried back up the path.

As we stood a moment looking into one anothers' faces amazedly, the moaning tones of the Moonlight Sonata were flung out on the summer air. It seemed as if crying defiance after us.

CHAPTER XII

"It's a case for the authorities," said Howell energetically, as we left the tents behind us; "it's outrageous that people are so imposed upon. Such rubbish!"

"What the palmist said was perfectly true," Lal asserted, with calmness; "Peggy and I know that, if you don't. As

for her daughter's strange—hallucination, you might almost call it, that is a matter of choice as to belief."

An expression difficult to define crossed her face, but I knew the odd statements made by the young woman gifted with second sight had settled in Lal's mind, and that they would not be eradicated in a day.

"Anyway," she continued gayly, "my course seems to be mapped out. I am to be an actress—great, she didn't say, did she? She probably left that to my inclination and will-power. Well, if I have my way about it, I shall rise above mediocrity at any rate."

"She spoke of the other arts," I said anxiously; "why don't you choose music or journalism or—"

"Who knows? The decisive moment hasn't come yet. When it does, I shall be ready. Suppose it should be the stage. Wouldn't it be strange? Why, I might meet the Sir Gallant who was at the club house ball in the profession. What was his name, Peggy?"

"You saw him more than I did. Didn't he tell you?" I answered evasively, feeling like a double-dyed hypocrite.

"No. There wasn't much chance for conversation that night."

Her eyes clouded a moment. I could see her mind was ready to become absorbed in the thought of her father and I hastened to distract her.

"Beresford, wasn't it?" I said.

"Was it? Yale Beresford. He—"

"I thought you didn't know his name!" I ejaculated.

"You told me his last. He told me his first."

I was staggered. How intimate their conversation had been in the few brief moments allotted them the night of the ball I could only guess.

"And his profession? How could you know that?" I queried wondering.

"I guessed it."

"Why—"

I was wordless.

She laughed at my confusion.

"It was the first thing I said to him as we stepped out on the piazza. I said, 'You're an actor, aren't you?' And he admitted it and then said something about wishing he was Hamlet to my Ophelia. Such extraordinary personal magnetism as he has, hasn't he? We passed Miriam Greyson in blue and white with the Yale color caught in her hair. He nodded at her and said, 'That's my name. The day I was born a football match came off between Yale and Harvard. My father and mother were both enthusiasts. They determined to name me for the college which was victorious.' An odd conceit, wasn't it? I wonder if I shall ever see him or hear from him again."

"I hope not," I answered with decision; "that man is a spoiled darling of the public. He has had admiration for his daily food. That kind of people are always selfish and difficult to get along with."

"Talk about antipathies! You form the most violent ones, Peggy," and Lal gauged me with her deep fringed eyes.

"I have no antipathy for the man," I hastened to reply, "only I wouldn't wish anyone I loved to be brought in close relationship with him."

"Then don't fear on my account. This village could not possibly hold any attraction for a man of his stamp."

If I hadn't been looking at her I would have had my doubts as to the accuracy of my ears. But I saw the faintest sigh heave her breast and I felt that had a few moments more been granted her wherein to become better acquainted with Beresford's charm of manner, I could not have answered for consequences. However, no damage had been done thus far and the incipient romance could be nipped in the bud.

"Aren't you thirsty?" asked Howell, as we neared the small and only hotel of which Thor's Island boasted; "it's growing closer. Come in here and have some soda water."

"I don't care for any," said Lal, who had suddenly lapsed into one of her quiet moods, "but I know Peggy is parched with thirst. Take her up there and give her something real cool, Howell. I am going down on the other beach. When you're through, come to me there, will you? I want to be alone for awhile."

She turned away and I wondered what train of thought she was going to pursue down upon the sands.

"She's odd, isn't she?" commented Howell as we were shown into a darkened parlor of the hotel, and some cooling beverages were brought us; "imagine her finding enjoyment on that hot beach. She must be thirsty too."

"Very likely. But she has a way of ignoring her physical wants. She's unconventional even as to food."

We lingered over the little table, and knowing just about the nature of the mood which had seized Lal, I realized how she would appreciate an hour to herself. So I turned my attention to the periodicals lying strewn upon an adjacent table, while Howell stood lost in contemplation of quite a large sized model of a ship enclosed in a glass case upon the wall.

A waiter came in and cleared the glasses away. When he had gone there was no one else in the parlors besides ourselves. Most of the occupants of the pleasure boats were sipping their draughts upon the hotel piazzas. I found the magazines uninteresting at such a time, and an unreasoning vexation toward Howell was beginning to make itself evident. How could he center all that attention upon that lifeless model when he knew I wanted him to talk to me?

Or, perhaps, he did not know. Of course not. How could he be expected to? He wasn't in love with me. But I was unhappy nevertheless, and showed my irritation by shuffling the papers upon the table in a manner that annoyed me while I did it.

Howell showed he had not been so lost in the inspection of the model by moving toward me as he asked:

"What is it, Peggy?"

"Nothing—more than usual," I answered, and then scorned myself for the admission.

"Row slowly, Peggy. Why don't you rest on your oars awhile? You take the struggle too hard."

"Can I help it?"

I looked up in his face with a sudden anger when I thought how long I had loved him. And he? He was no nearer loving me now than that day so long ago when he had discovered I had given him my heart without the asking. Was it to be so forever? Would I never win his love? Was it impossible for him to care for me? Was I so unattractive? No, not in his eyes, even; for often he had told me himself that I was pretty, with ways to attract many men. But he was adamant; he thought sometimes his heart must be flint not to feel an echo of responsive love.

"Can I help it?" I reiterated, looking up with wrathful eyes, for I was furious at my miserable attempts of concealment and their pitiful failure; "mine isn't the only case under the sun. It's because I'm a girl, I suppose. When a man—loves, likes a girl who is indifferent to him, people are sorry and give him sympathy, Simon pure. But when a girl is weak enough to—to—care for a man who has no more heart than a—a—"

"Stone," suggested Howell with pitiless promptness.

"—stone," I repeated, "why then there is contempt thrown in for the girl. Where a man loves it's often his fortune. Where a woman loves it is always her misfortune. And when people learn of your—your indifference, nothing but pitying contempt will be shown me. Oh, I'm tired of it, tired of it."

I rose abruptly and went to the window overlooking the north beach.

To say I was thoroughly ashamed of my sudden outburst is stating it mildly. I did not usually yield to my emotions, but something in Howell's manner to-day jarred on me and I had been unable to restrain the words I would now have given much to be able to recall.

Not that they hurt Howell. But I knew he keenly felt the humiliation I was suffering. I have often wondered what other men would have done in his position. Surely nine-tenths of them, caring for me no more than Howell did, would have been bored beyond endurance. But sympathy was a large factor in this son of the sea, and I had yet to learn to feel his coldness.

He came now to the window and stood beside me. His voice was very low when he spoke and he looked down steadily upon my averted face.

"It is a hard position for anyone, Peggy. Don't you suppose I realize that? And perhaps it is worse for a girl. But, my dear, no one need ever know. Certainly not from me. We can't arrange the affection of our hearts to suit ourselves. But it's just because I don't care for anyone else that I think it is very possible I shall care for you some day. At any rate I am trying hard—and you mustn't be vexed that it's such slow work."

He ended lamely, though his natural dignity did not desert him. A rueful expression had spread over his features. I couldn't help laughing, though I felt little like it. His face brightened as he heard me.

"You are complimentary, as usual, sir," I said, with an attempt at lightness; "it's perfectly disgraceful to what one's feelings can lead on. This had been the outburst of a child, Howell. You'll overlook it, won't you? It shall never occur again, I promise you. If I didn't care for you so—but there, this is repetition again. What's the time? Let's hunt up Lal and put for home."

"It's 4 o'clock. We have ample time."

Reassured by my usual tones Howell rid himself of the little air of embarrassment which I always noticed he wore when speaking of personal matters. We left the parlor and were detained some moments in the hall by friends. Leaving them at last we made our way to the beach. Not a sign of Lal disturbed the monotony of the shore.

"Where is she?" asked Howell with striking intelligence.

"You know about as well as I do. But she must be around somewhere."

I raised my voice and called her by name. Howell put his fingers in his mouth and emitted a piercing whistle. But there was no answering call, and I was beginning to feel provoked.

"Perhaps she is in a nook behind the cliffs somewhere," said Howell; "wait till I look."

He was gone, running along the beach. I soon saw him clambering like a cat around the jutty rocks, being lost to my view as he made his search among the coves. I still raised my voice, hallooing, but to no purpose. Presently Howell came back extremely nonplused.

"I've looked thoroughly everywhere. She isn't in any of the coves. What on earth do you suppose has become of her? This isn't a trick of hers, is it?" he said suddenly, looking at me.

"Certainly not," I answered; "Lal isn't child enough for such foolery. Something has happened to her, Howell."

"Nonsense. It's too safe along here, if that's what you are thinking of. Why, if she were to have fallen in the water from the rocks she'd get nothing but a wetting. The tide isn't strong there at any time, and it's not deep enough to drown in."

I looked around in some anxiety.

"We must make inquiries, that's all," I said; "I can't help feeling worried."

We retraced our steps toward the west beach where the *Halcyon* was moored. As we passed the hotel piazza Miriam Greyson standing upon the lower steps beckoned to us. I hurried, instinctively, feeling she could tell us something about Lal.

"Are you looking for Lal?" she asked, adding to my quick nod, "well, she gave her ankle an awful wrench out there on the cliffs and for a little while she said she thought she was dying, she felt so like fainting. She—"

"But where is she?" interposed Howell.

"Gone home. She—"

"Gone home?" I echoed; "for goodness sake! what did she do that for? Why didn't she wait for us?"

"She couldn't. She was suffering such awful pain. She told me to tell you not to mind."

"But how?" I began.

"Oh, Florence Westlake's party took her aboard. She's better there than with you. They had some whiskey and they rubbed her foot with it. It was awfully swollen, and the poor thing was so white. She was worried about you for a moment, but the others told her you'd follow right away. She's better with them. They'll get her home more quickly."

"How long have they been gone?" Howell asked.

"About a half hour. You can't overtake them. Mr. Westlake's boat is faster. But I don't know—you might—"

For one dread moment the propriety of going home alone with Howell had shot through my mind. Other things seemed to sink into insignificance suddenly. I formed a sudden resolution.

"Won't you come home with us?" I asked, adding hastily, "it's so quiet with only two—"

Realizing how ridiculous I was appearing, I stopped short.

"I'd like to," said Miriam, but I saw a latent laugh in her eyes, "but I'm with mother. We're going to stay all night at the hotel. You two are all right. How can you be quiet? Sing songs. I hope Lal's ankle doesn't give her any great trouble."

I turned away towards the wharf where I could see the white sail of the *Halcyon*. This enforced tete-a-tete sail was none of my doing. I was glad of that. But wouldn't I scold when I got home? Such thoughtlessness of Lal, causing me a most uncomfortable position. And in the face of my outbreak of the afternoon!

I didn't utter a word on the way to the boat. As we reached her Howell took my hand to help me in, but he

stayed me as my feet touched the gunwale. I looked at him and saw that his face had its kindest expression though laughter lurked in his eyes.

"You're not afraid of me, Peggy?" he said as he looked at me, "even though we go back alone? I promise to sail as fast as I can."

"It's not that, but—"

CHAPTER XIII

"But what?" questioned Howell, as he helped me over, and with unusual celerity proceeded to unmoor his boat.

"How thoughtless of Lal to leave us like this!" I replied.

I couldn't think of the pain she most assuredly must have been suffering to have left me in such an awkward predicament, so worried was I as to the outcome of the affair. If the pain in her ankle was so intense as not to admit of any delay in getting back to Nineveh, Lal certainly wouldn't be waiting for me at the wharf.

I would have to go home alone! And what a reception would be accorded me at the house. I could easily picture Aunt Marion's angry looks when she learned where we had been and with whom.

"It's only a question of an hour and a half. Two at the most," was Howell's comforting assurance as he got a starboard tack and guided his catboat out into the open.

"There doesn't seem to be much breeze," I said, restlessly going from one side of the boat to the other.

"It'll freshen presently. I'll have to ask you to keep still, Peggy. Sit on the port side, will you?"

With the sunlight full upon my face I was in an excellent position for a critical survey. I dimly realized that Howell was watching me closely, but for what reason I didn't learn until afterward. We sailed along for quite a time with little interchange of conversation. We had left Thor's Island far

in the distance; indeed, we could no longer see anything but the dim outline.

A mist, not very heavy as yet, but which to my fast gathering alarm seemed in a fair way of increasing, had begun to settle round us. We did not seem to be making nearly as much headway as when we had started. I looked anxiously at Howell, whose far-reaching eyes were constantly scanning the horizon.

"Shall we be able to make it?" I asked; "will we get in before this mist thickens? Can't this boat sail any faster? We are simply creeping."

"It's the breeze, Peggy. There doesn't seem to be much about. I was afraid of this."

"And it's much, much warmer than when we started," I said; "and it—why, it's dying out altogether!" I gasped, rising in utter consternation. "Do you hear, Howell? The wind is dying out."

As I spoke, the sail above us flapped languidly in the expiring breeze and made a movement as if on the verge of collapse. The boat, which already had slackened her speed, gradually slowed in her progress and came almost to a standstill.

Howell sprang for the little anchor and threw it overboard, securing it by the rope attached to it.

"It's a dead calm," he answered briefly in answer to the look I gave him; "we can't afford to drift around aimlessly with this haze settling all the while."

"But we mustn't stay here," I urged; "take in your sail and row till the breeze comes up. Do something, for heaven's sake. We're only losing time. Here—where are the oars? Let me row."

"There are no oars for this boat, Peggy. Don't you know that? This catboat's too large. Oars are only used in the smaller ones."

I sat down ready to cry miserably. But I choked the inclination though the feeling of helplessness pervading my frame I felt must be evincing itself upon my features. How-

ell came over beside me. He was plainly concerned for my worried state—that I saw.

"It isn't the most agreeable position in the world to be in," he said; "but you mustn't fret like this, Peggy. What's the use? There's got to be an end to everything. We'll find a way out of this presently. As soon as the wind veers around we'll haul up the anchor and go spanking along. When it comes, it will come so swiftly that we can easily make up for lost time."

"But when will we reach home?"

"Not very late, I hope. Seven or eight o'clock ought to see us at the pier. Come; cheer up, little woman. There must be others in the same fix somewhere about. The calm hasn't made us the particular object of its caprice."

"Can't you halloo to attract some one?"

I realized the stupidity of my question as soon as it was uttered.

"There isn't a sail in sight. And if there was, none could come to our relief unless the breeze sprang up, and in that case we could help ourselves. Don't you see?"

I admitted I saw, and immediately begged pardon for the lack of intellect I had displayed. Howell smiled down upon my perturbed face.

"You're worrying about your aunt now, aren't you? You can't think of anything else. Well, see here, Peggy. Chase that contraction of your eyes away, and I'll promise faithfully to get you out of this with no consequent trouble. I'll fix things all right. Now, that's a bargain, isn't it?"

Knowing he was talking simply to distract my thoughts, and realizing the anxiety for me he must be feeling, I endeavored to pull myself together. As I arose to assume a more comfortable position, I felt a change in the boat.

"Oh!" I cried; "we're moving! We're moving! The breeze has come. Quick, Howell; to the tiller!"

At the same moment he had dashed to the side of the boat and grabbed hastily at the rope securing the anchor. This he pulled in with long sweeps of the arm. But I saw the startled look in his eyes as he turned to me.

"The anchor's gone. The rope's parted. It was rotting. I ought to have known," he said, throwing the coil of rope on the deck.

As he spoke we began to drift toward the west. Howell looked at me appealingly.

"Can you ever forgive me?" he asked, apparently heedless of our own really serious position.

"Oh, this isn't the time to talk of that," I exclaimed; "what shall we do? Oh! what can we do?"

The two of us now stood in the center of the boat trying to penetrate the thickness of the mist that was rapidly enveloping us, excluding all objects.

"That's useless," said Howell, as I caught the tiller, making a sorry attempt at a course; "in five minutes you won't be able to see a yard ahead of you. I hope to heaven we don't run into anything. What confounded luck to have this fog come up now!"

"We really are in danger, Howell. We must keep making a noise of some sort to warn any craft of our approach. Do you think there is any likelihood of our being run down?"

Howell had been looking from left to right, in front and behind us with his searching eyes, which I felt must discover something, so keen was their glance. But the fog closed round, and I waited, hopeless. Yet I looked up expectantly as he turned to me.

"I'm not going to deceive you," he said, and I felt the reflection of his paleness; "I am not positive just where we are, but—but—I'm pretty sure of the course we're taking. And I can't help it, Peggy—"

"What—what?" I ejaculated.

"We're drifting out to the ocean."

He spoke calmly, but that did not prevent a look of terror from freezing upon my face.

"I think there's a horn here somewhere," he went on, making a hurried search for it under the seats; "I'll keep blowing it. It may do some good if we fall in the track of an ocean steamer."

"Oh, Howell!"

"That's only a possibility. I want to prepare you for the worst. Whatever happens, I'm a good swimmer and could easily keep you afloat for an hour or two."

He put the mouthpiece of the horn to his lips. He blew but the only sound emitted was a great expulsion of air. Again he made the attempt. A most ludicrous, measly wail, barely audible enough to be designated as a sound, came forth. Howell carefully examined the horn a minute. Then he flung it under the seat.

"Broken!" he exclaimed, in tones of mingled despair and disgust; "well, I'll have to rely on the horn Nature gave me. I'll shout awhile and see what effect that'll have."

He began hallooing and calling, using his hands as a speaking trumpet, pausing to listen between his shouts. He kept this up till he was red in the face. I begged him to stop and let me try. Then I called, using my voice at its full capacity. Thus we alternated, varying the monotony occasionally by shouting in unison. We were occupied thus, finding small entertainment in the proceedings, and had drifted about a mile, as far as Howell could determine, when simultaneously we felt a sudden jar to the boat's bottom.

Howell started to his feet as I leaned over the side trying to discover what had happened. A moment later I heard him say, in a voice indicating the most intense relief:

"Thank the Lord!"

"What is it?" I asked, stepping up to where he was peering over the side of the boat; "what is it now?"

"The sand-bar. Thank God, we've struck it! Now we are comparatively safe."

"But—but, my goodness, Howell, we'll have to wait till the tide comes in to drift us off. And suppose a breeze comes up in the meantime. Oh, this is awful. We're worse off than before."

And I sat down, realizing I had reached the lowest depths of despair.

"Not at all, Peggy. Don't you see, our safety lies in the sand-bar? This fog would handicap us every way. We know where we are now. We aren't drifting and needn't fear collision with any other vessel. This old sand-bar is the best kind of an anchor. I'm thankful. When the fog lifts and the tide comes in—"

He paused, and I saw by the expression just dawning upon his features that some thought was forcibly seizing him and seemingly checking every other idea in his head. And there was creeping over me a paralyzing sense of something that began to take definite shape and assume proportions that well-nigh unnerved me.

Presently I became aware it was the same thought traversing Howell's imagination. Had his mind communicated it to me? Or had my own agitated brain preconceived the state of affairs?

I was in a Turkish bath of apprehension. I could hardly move my lips to frame the words I felt I must utter.

"When the fog lifts and the tide comes in," I said with difficulty, repeating Howell's last words; "I know the meaning of these heavy fogs. They stay till morning! And the tide—Oh! the tide! It won't come in till then, either."

Well?" with a counterfeit cheerfulness; "aside from the alarm we will cause them at home, there's no need for worry. We are perfectly safe."

"Safe? Yes, we are that, certainly. Oh, don't you see? Of course you do—you are pretending not to—I'm trying to but I can't brush it aside. Oh! what shall I do? I would much rather we had run into something and got spilled out. We at least might have been picked up, and—and—there would have been others with us. And people couldn't have said—"

I turned away and walked to the prow. I gazed out into the thick fog, the blinding tears searing my vision even more than the mist. I could see my whole black future, my shattered reputation rising before me. The whispers and nods that would be provoked by my presence, the cold stares of

the women, the cavalier glances of the men, Aunt Marion's freezing looks, Adelaide's contemptuous stare—all these thoughts rushed in a swirl through my mind. If I dreaded meeting Aunt Marion early in the evening, how much more did I now shrink from the thought of facing her in the morning.

As far as reputation went, I was ruined. No matter what people believed, I would always be a marked girl. A stain would forever rest upon my name. Could I ever live down the cruel fatefulness of this night? With a half-suppressed sob I sank in a heap on a coil of rope.

In a moment I felt myself lifted up and conveyed to Lal's recent nest among the cushions, and Howell was sitting beside me with his hand upon my head and his kind eyes resting thoughtfully upon me.

"If anyone ever says anything, Peggy," he was saying; "if anyone ever dares to cast a slur upon you, I'll not only knock him flat, but he'll make a public apology. It's too bad we're situated so. But we must make the best of it. See, I'll make you comfortable here—or would you rather go in the cabin?—and I'll go aft. I won't sleep to-night, but watch, but you must take some rest. Can't you cat-nap awhile?"

"No—no; it is impossible. Oh, Howell, if people would talk about our not going in mourning, what won't they say when—when—"

"Leave me to settle with them. They will not dare. Why—"

He paused, and his mind seemed revolving an idea. But he didn't finish his sentence. He turned away, but came back almost immediately.

"It's only 8 o'clock," he said; "let's see if we can't make the time a little less heavy? I'm sorry I'm such a poor host," he added, looking up at me suddenly, a laugh in his sunny eyes.

"You aren't, Howell. But I'm so horribly worried. Just think of Aunt Marion's face when she sees me. Oh, it is too *dreadful.*"

"You mustn't expect me to notice these spasms of yours. Here is a checker-board. Come, have a game with me. They're Frank's. I thought he took them ashore."

"I don't care about playing, really." My voice, I am sure, expressed the apathy of despair.

"No; but be self-sacrificing—to please me. It's so dull unless we do something."

The winsomeness of his smile was irresistible. I sat up and Howell placed the checker-board between us. Checkers had never been an exhilarating game to me, but somehow, under the influence of Howell's presence, possibly, my interest grew and I beat him the three games.

"I have won," I exclaimed, not without a tinge of exultation in my voice, "and you played your best. You know you did."

"Yes. But it was like struggling against Fate. You can't get around Fate, you know. She is a very subtle woman. I wonder if you will have your own way always. Will you win every time?"

He laughed as he spoke, but I read the deep significance in his eyes.

"I've had things very little the way I have wanted them," I said, whereat Howell turned a very quizzical look upon me.

His expression changed and seemed to deepen into something akin to tenderness as he observed in a perfectly prosaic tone:

"It's a curious thing, Peggy. Do you know, I have often asked myself if you will make me love you in the end? I am quite sure I care for you a little bit more each day."

I moved impatiently.

"Don't be so cold-blooded, Howell. When one can dissect one's feelings like that, one may be sure one isn't in love," I added, with a bitter contraction of the heart.

"How do you know that isn't love—this calm, unswerving feeling? If Lal was here she'd agree with me, for she always argues that love in its perfection is a quiet, cool quantity."

"Yes, she argues that way. But she'd be the last one in

the world to be content with such a thing. What woman wants to be loved with a quiet, cool affection?"

I rose and walked back and forth in sheer weariness of mind. Howell looked around as if for inspiration to suggest some antidote for the tedium.

"There isn't a book or scrap of paper on board," he said, apologetically; "otherwise, you might put up with this monotony."

"Oh, don't mind me."

Night set in. By 10 o'clock the fog was denser than ever, and enveloped us like a blanket. Even knowing how futile the idea, I listened intently for the sound of some approaching boat, having a forlorn hope that scouts had been sent out for us. But I soon realized how impossible it would be for anything like this to be done.

And then back again I went to conjuring up the scene in the morning, when I should walk in upon them. At this point my courage failed me, and sick at heart, I laid down on the couch Howell had arranged for me. He smiled as he threw a light covering over me, for the air had grown chilly with the advance of night.

"Try to sleep. It will be morning then before you know it."

He shaded the light in the bow from my eyes and spread his tall figure among some canvas bags at the masthead. Completely fatigued by the events of the past few hours, I soon drifted off to sleep. I awakened with a start two or three times during the night. My unusual surroundings startled me for the first few minutes, and I sprang up with a slight exclamation, whereupon Howell rose quickly as he said:

"Anything I can do for you, Peggy?"

I assured him there was nothing, and he returned to his post to continue his vigil, humming in his light tenor some soft melody.

It was daylight when I felt the motion of the incoming *tide gently* swaying the *Halcyon*. The fog was lifting rap-

idly. A swift breeze, gaining in strength every moment, bellied the sail. I gazed with a sinking heart toward Nineveh, yet with a sigh of relief for our start.

Howell was at the tiller guiding us homeward, only a slight look of weariness in his eyes to betray the fact of his night's watch.

"The mist will clear in five minutes, Peggy," he said, "and aren't we scurrying at a great rate? It's 6 o'clock. We'll get in by 9; possibly 8:30."

"We surely will make faster speed than that," I said, blankly.

"Hardly. We're a long way from home. Never fear. Things will be all right."

But I knew by his very apparent counterfeit ease that he was not looking forward to our landing at the pier with any degree of comfort. We did not exchange further words till we reached Nineveh.

CHAPTER XIV

It was almost 9 o'clock when we reached the pier.

There were very active signs of life in evidence upon the wharf. Many of the fishermen had been at their day's work since sunrise. The owners of the boats in the Bay were stirring, cleaning out their crafts for possible patrons in another hour. Some of the women from the adjacent houses were bargaining for the early catch of fish brought in by the most persistent of the fishermen.

The children in their brown hollands and with still browner bare legs shrieked their delight as they played in the sands. A group of loungers hung around in more or less picturesque attitudes in front of the public house which was built close onto the pier overlooking the water.

To me it seemed there had never been so many people

congregated about the wharf at one time before. I dreaded to raise my eyes as Howell lifted me out of the boat. But I realized to appear ashamed of my position was only to make matters worse for me. But I thought I would rather be whipped than to run the gantlet of all the curious and, in some instances, smirking eyes turned upon us.

Nothing could have exceeded the courteous manner that invested Howell as he stepped along by my side. The innate manliness of the fellow came prominently to the fore, and his bearing, so kind, so tender and withal so chivalrous, made my cheeks burn with emotion, and I've no doubt that every construction save the right one was put upon this.

But I held my head high, even when we passed Howell's father, who looked at us both narrowly from out his canny eyes without speaking.

"I'll be back shortly, father," said Howell in passing; "I want to take Miss Kersey up the Park."

Not a word in reply, but—was it a grin on the old man's face? I had always been half afraid of him, knowing that he had been a perfect Tartar in his youth, keeping every mother with a daughter in Nineveh trembling until he had married.

We had now gotten by the greater number of inquisitive groups dotting the wharf. As we had passed each one, conversation had ceased with that abruptness that always conveys the pleasant conviction that one's self has been the fruitful subject. We could hear nothing certain, however, until just as we were stepping on the plank walk at the end of the pier.

Four or five idlers lounging here almost obstructed our passage. They moved deliberately for us to pass, but one of them in whom I recognized the postmaster's son, and who disliked Howell for some fancied wrong, brushed against me in an impudent manner, and leered insultingly in my face.

With a sudden dexterous movement Howell had caught him by the shoulder and twirled him like a top into the roadway. It was with difficulty that he retained his equilibrium.

A loud laugh greeted this summary treatment. The fellow turned fiercely upon his companions, as if to resent their ridicule, but apparently changing his mind he grinned idiotically as he said, loud enough for all of us to hear:

"Feels real sporty for so early in the morning, don't he? Got some of his father's blood in him, he has, and the old man's a Turk. Hey, when are the banns? You'll need them, I'm thinkin'."

An expressive grin ran from face to face among the group.

The white look I rarely, if ever, saw upon Howell's features gathered now. I feared for anyone causing that expression, and the strong, sinewy frame of this sea-bred lad was a formidable one when accompanied by it.

With a "Wait a moment, Peggy," Howell stepped back to the group which was now alive with the most active interest.

"Your meaning?" he said to young Marston; "explain your meaning. Be careful."

"What do you s'pose? I speak English. My meanin's all right. Everyone in the village has the same meanin'. It wasn't a put-up job to get rid of the third party and stay out all night with this one, was it? Oh—"

"You damned scandal-chewer!" thundered Howell, and with one blow of his powerful fist he had the man prone upon the ground; "open your mouth again, except to apologize, and I'll throw your carcass into the Bay for the fish."

He stood over him as if to annihilate him. It had been a stunning blow, but the fellow was very little inferior in strength to Howell, and struggled to his feet with more alacrity than the rest of us were prepared for.

"I'll say what I please," he blustered out, with rising fight in his eyes; "it's common gossip now. And you won't stop me, you bullying—"

Another sledge-hammer blow and again his length was measured upon the sands. Had it not been for the soft earth there would have been greater damage. As it was, I ex-

pected to see a free fight at any moment in which everybody would join indiscriminately. I called to Howell, but he paid no attention to me.

Marston had gotten to his feet for the second time. But his face was bleeding, and he looked momentarily cowed.

"I apologize," he said sullenly; but as he moved away I heard him muttering to himself.

"That was back water for you," said Howell, as he rejoined me; "some people do know when they've had enough. He has more sense than I thought. I'm sorry this happened, but I had to punish him. He's a dirty dog, anyway. It's well he apologized. I would have put him to sleep if he hadn't."

I was quivering with mortification at the occurrence, though I had to confess the fellow had gotten his deserts.

As we turned into the main street of the village every other person we passed was some one we knew. In every case we were treated to the most profound stare, immediately supplemented by smiles so peculiar in their expression that I could not doubt the meaning.

"Oh! do you—do you think everyone is talking?" I cried. "What Ned Marston said is true. Everyone in Nineveh must know we have been out alone all night."

Howell did not answer. But I could see his jaw was set and the determined look had entered his eyes again. Not once did he relax his gentle manner toward me, however.

When we reached the path just inside the Park leading along the lake, I begged him to leave me.

"You can do no good, Howell. You don't know Aunt Marion. Let me go up to the house alone."

"And leave you to weather it alone? I guess not. You shall not go stealing in as if you were afraid to meet them. They shall know the ins and outs of this matter."

With which decision we continued our way along the arbored path which Lal and I had so thoughtlessly traveled but yesterday. We went around to the front entrance. The screen door was unlatched, as it always was through the spring and summer.

I led the way into the parlor and was about to retire to summon Aunt Marion when that lady stepped over the threshold of the room with Rafe and Adelaide immediately behind her. The last two maintained a most profound silence at the beginning.

Aunt Marion stopped short as she caught sight of Howell.

"This is young Hope, isn't it, Margaret?" and as I nodded, "I believe you know my objections to any acquaintance in this instance. The Park people have never mixed at all with the Bay people. Why do you disobey me?"

Where was Lal that she hadn't accounted for all the wretched mishaps? I was about to answer Aunt Marion when Howell forestalled me. We were all standing, but upon none of us rested the simple dignity that invested Howell as he addressed Mrs. North.

"I am very sorry, Mrs. North, that you should disapprove of any friendliness between your niece and myself. I think I have never done anything that would not become a gentleman, though I have not the air or dress of one perhaps. I—"

"Have you come up here at this hour of the morning to tell me this?" demanded Aunt Marion.

"No, Mrs. North. You simply provoked that remark. My object in coming this morning is to let you know what detained us from getting in last night with or after Lal. We—"

"Miss North has been able to explain matters," said Aunt Marion frigidly, and I saw her figure bristle at Howell's familiar reference to Lal.

"We knew, of course, you would find rooms at the hotel at the island," said Rafe, speaking for the first time, "or go to the Landworth's, who have a cottage—"

"We did neither." The look Howell gave his hearers was very frank. "I think it necessary that you should know exactly the circumstances, in case—in case of any further disagreeableness. When we learned that your daughter,"

turning again to Aunt Marion, "hurt her ankle and returned without us, Peggy" (I could feel Aunt's eyes upon me) "and I immediately put for home. But it seemed like a fatality that we shouldn't reach Nineveh till this morning."

Howell paused a barely perceptible moment, and I saw Adelaide's eyes glisten.

"First a calm came up. We lost our anchor and after drifting awhile we landed on a sand-bar. Then the fog came and settled matters, forcing us to remain out on the water till morning. The—"

"And you were out alone in the boat all night?" exclaimed Aunt Marion, with dread emphasis upon each word.

"Yes, except that we were together. That does away with the fact of being alone," replied Howell, with a tinge of humor in his voice, utterly ignoring the horrified looks upon Aunt Marion's face.

I could not pretend to be oblivious of the impression the intelligence had made upon the three. Rafe looked grave and slightly contemptuous. Adelaide's face was expressive of the utmost scorn. As for Aunt Marion, I shuddered when I looked at her. The gaze she turned upon Howell as he made his last remark was awful.

"How you can see anything humorous in an affair so disgraceful, I fail to understand," she said, with cutting clearness, "but I suppose it is what one must always expect. Blood will tell."

Howell flushed, as I knew I would.

But he answered with no diminution of respect in his attitude.

"Believe me, Mrs. North, I see nothing ludicrous in the case. I may say I think no one can be more alive to the consequences than I am. If you will permit—"

"I have permitted too much thus far in allowing you to enter my house at all," broke in Aunt Marion in arrogant tones, oblivious to the fact that the house was no longer hers; "this is an affair which is deeply regretted by me, but it seems to have been unavoidable. I am in a degree responsible for Miss Kersey, and naturally any odium at-

taching to her will reflect upon me. But I am capable of managing the affairs of this household without outside assistance. If Miss Kersey had honored my expressed wishes in regard to you, this wretched contretemps would never have occurred."

"You need not consider yourself in the light of a champion," here interposed Rafe, with slightly veiled sarcasm, for which I hated him; "if there is any scandal—any talk, I shall settle matters."

He looked at Howell as if upon a being of an inferior order. The difference between the two was striking.

With the air of an aristocrat, with finely cut features and close curling hair and wearing his clothes as if born to the purple, Rafe was a conspicuous figure anywhere. But the same expression of detestable conceit marking Adelaide's face, marred his features. It detracted from any natural manliness he might have possessed.

Howell, on the other hand, as a man, in his very modesty towered above him. In his rough, blue jersey, with a sailor's knot of white at his throat, his little peaked hat hanging loosely in his hand and the strong color leaping and receding from under his brown face, he was immeasurably Rafe's superior. One was a man; the other, a handsome counterfeit.

Howell addressed Aunt Marion when he spoke.

"I am sorry I am in such disfavor here. I did not realize that prejudice could go so far. But it seems to be more a characteristic of the upper classes. There is none of it among us. I did the very best I could. I hope you will believe me. But we were very awkwardly placed."

He turned toward the door. I was by his side in a moment.

"You did nobly, better than anyone else could have done, Howell," I said; "please believe I am grateful. Never mind the others."

"Margaret!" exclaimed Aunt Marion in her sternest tones.

But I could not turn my beseeching eyes from Howell

until I had heard his low murmured, "Thank you, Peggy."

Then it was that I heard Lal's voice over the banister.

"Peggy, Peggy, won't you come up here? I can't get downstairs, and I want to know the particulars."

I turned abruptly.

"Good-bye, Howell," I said, hurriedly, as he passed through the doorway.

But I didn't hear his reply.

Aunt Marion had closed the door sharply upon the retreating figure and was following me upstairs.

CHAPTER XV

That summer was vividly eventful in my mind for numerous things; but because of a series of incendiary fires others remembered the year well. They began in May, and from that time on until September they were of almost weekly occurrence.

In vain had a large reward been offered for the capture of the malefactor or malefactors. In vain had enraged property holders stood guard all night with Winchesters, on the alert for suspicious characters. In vain had the police force been augmented. And though private watchmen were employed by the richer inhabitants, naught came of it. Many were the clews discovered, but beyond this there was nothing tangible.

We were quite certain our turn was sure to come. And though John did duty by night and slept much of the day, I knew we were not safe.

There was a curious phase to the affair. Nothing but barns was fired. The houses were left alone. This peculiar fact seemed to suggest the idea of lunacy on the part of the incendiary. He seemed to be content with a huge blaze. He did not seek to imperil human lives.

Be that as it may, it made us no less uneasy, and John

had tramped around the grounds night after night through the summer, eventually contracting a cold in a thunderstorm. Then he was laid prostrate with rheumatism. As a fire had not occurred in three weeks we began to feel more secure and even to think the maniac had appeased his lust for flames, and that we would escape the trail of his strange wantonness.

Our sailing escapade, following as it did close upon the heels of the last fire scare, kept me from thinking of anything else. Contrite as Lal was for her thoughtlessness which had cost me so dear, it could not lessen the shadow which was gradually closing around me and blackening every shred of reputation I possessed.

I dreaded to go out lest I should be seen by some one, only to be ignored or gazed at curiously.

The day after our sailing mishap I went around the house miserably, unconsoled by Lal's repentant face, subdued by Aunt Marion's chill glance and Adelaide's ill-suppressed sneers.

I had confided my fears to Lal in the privacy of her room, but she indignantly denied the possibility of any form of disgrace attaching itself to me.

"Everyone will understand it was an accident," she said, "or ought to, at any rate. Only the mean, the contemptible will assail your honor. Pshaw! Peggy, you've been reading too many latter-day novels."

"Not a novel have I read in six weeks," I stoutly asserted, "but I know the gossip of a little village like this if you don't. It's the mean and contemptible who go to make up three-quarters of the world, and I know what will be said."

"After all, what do you care what is said," returned Lal, assuming her argumentative attitude; "that doesn't make your supposed misdemeanor a solemn fact. Individual opinion is nothing. As long as you know yourself that you did nothing wrong what does it matter? You have the confidence of your own honesty."

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"But as long as we are in the world we are more or less influenced by criticism," I said, aghast at her arguing; "we must be guided by certain things. Individual opinion makes public opinion, and we have to reckon with that if we want to live comfortably or happily, if we wish to be respected."

"Do you care so much what people think of you? I wouldn't give a straw for anyone's opinion if it went in direct contradiction of my own knowledge that my motives were pure. I—"

"In other words, you are sufficient unto yourself? Ah! my dear, none of us can say, 'I am myself, alone.'"

An odd little smile twirled Lal's mouth.

"I shall always do what I consider right," she said; "even," she paused a moment, "if it is in direct contrariety to established laws. I hate forms and laws."

"If your will is in opposition to the laws handed down to us from many generations, you may be sure you are wrong," I said gravely.

"Not at all, dear. Do reformers follow the law? They make their own. They improve upon old, worn-out laws."

"You surely do not mean to become a reformer?" I was in earnest, for I was never certain what Lal would take into her head to do next.

"Don't be alarmed. I have my living to make. Reformers never made theirs since the world began. They have been hooted and laughed at. But I shall establish my own code of what is right and wrong, and I shall live by it, even if it cost me my life."

I looked at her frail figure, but my eyes traveled from it to her face and I knew she would have the strength of her convictions.

Dr. Breeze made his second visit to look at Lal's ankle that morning.

"A bad sprain," he said, "but you ought to be around again in a few days. A pretty expensive sprain it was for you, Peggy," turning to me.

Lal's face had the intentness of a black and tan terrier as she forestalled my reply by her abrupt demand.

"And why, if you please, Dr. Breeze?"

The doctor was a cruelly blunt man at times, and being the best physician in Nineveh, never hesitated to speak as he chose. He laughed as he looked at me.

"Why, it has set the gossips' tongues a-wagging. Did you ever see anything like this village? They have you and young Hope as good as spliced."

"It is an outrage," cried Lal, springing to her feet, forgetful of her hurt, only to sit down again abruptly; "why is it people are forever putting the meanest construction upon things? I—"

"After all, what does it matter?" I said quietly; "you don't believe anything wrong of me, Lallie. It is only opinion. What is opinion as long as you know you are right?"

Dr. Breeze looked at me searchingly.

"I am quoting Lal," I said; "these are her arguments. They are comforting, aren't they?"

"She is consistent at any rate," he laughed, sarcastically.

"Odium against oneself is nothing compared to odium against those we love," said Lal hotly; "what we would resent for others we can be indifferent to for ourselves."

"Logic, I doubt not; but I would be zealous of my own reputation before another's, I think."

"That is the selfishness of man. From time immemorial we have had examples of that." Turning to me, she said impetuously, "We won't stay in this miserable village, Peggy. You and I can be happy and self-supporting elsewhere."

"Oh, we neither of us would leave home, Lal, without the rest," I hastened to say, observing the interested look in Dr. Breeze's eyes, and knowing full well that in less than an hour the knowledge that Lal North was entertaining the idea of leaving home would be disseminated throughout Nineveh.

"Self-supporting, eh?" grunted our medicus; "that's the trend of the century for women. But get your right field. Don't get into uncongenial pastures."

Then he left directions as to treatment for the injured foot to which Lal paid no attention, but gazed pointedly out of the window. I saw the worthy man to the door, was as civil as I could be in the face of his impolite remark, and returned to Lal to reprove her for her discourtesy.

"He's a beast," she said, "to have repeated the gossip. If people wouldn't carry these things from house to house and person to person there would be no mischief done. But, dear, I'm worried—there's no use talking—about this wretched business. If you didn't care it wouldn't be so bad. But you're not the kind to weather a thing through with your head high. And it was all my fault, though heaven knows how I could have refused to grab at the first offer to relieve that intense pain of yesterday."

"I know, dear, I know. Never mind that. It is all past. Things can only be patched up now—if I can ever think of a way."

"I should be the one to think of a remedy—seeing it was I who brought all this to pass. Perhaps, though, Peggy, things will blow over. Often, don't you know, there is much talk and fuss in a place and in the end it amounts to nothing."

"I don't know—I hope so," I answered vaguely. There was too much apprehension at my heart for me to regard things in any but a pessimistic light.

That night's occurrences settled everything.

Not content with the day's review of the subject, I slipped into Lal's room after all the others had gone to rest to talk to her until we both fell asleep. It was late when I drowsed off and I could not have been asleep more than an hour when the glare of a fierce, steady light shining on my face awakened me.

I was out of bed in an instant, having a strong premonition of what had occurred. One glance out of the window

confirmed my suspicions. The two immense hay stacks in the rear of our barn at the end of the vegetable garden were in flames, and threatening every moment to ignite the barn itself.

Already dark forms were running across the fields, and I could hear the shouts and cries of the men down the road as they worked with the heavy, inadequate fire engine which was Nineveh's pride.

I had not been at the window five minutes before it seemed as though the whole town had poured itself into our estate. People only partially dressed raced recklessly over our beautiful lawns and ran helter skelter through the gardens to reach the scene of activity. Each succeeding fire, instead of lessening public curiosity by the undeviating sameness, had infuriated all Nineveh, and had caused curses and maledictions to be strewn broadcast throughout the county. I could hear the angry imprecations of the town rabble as they passed under my window.

The others had been aroused. Rafe had gotten into his trousers and shoes and was out among the crowd shouting orders and I could see him joining in the work of extinguishing the flames. Aunt Marion had hurriedly followed him. Adelaide, whose room was between Lal's and mine, had rushed in to be with us as soon as she had gotten it through her head that danger menaced. She sat cowering at one of the windows, importuning me as to the extent of the danger to us.

Lal, who, though a light sleeper, was ordinarily dazed upon awakening suddenly, was sitting up in bed, asking me incoherent questions while collecting her scattered senses. I had already gotten on half my clothes and was buttoning every other button on my shoes.

"You're not g—g—going out, are you?" Adelaide asked, as I caught up a shawl from a muddled heap of Lal's things.

"Certainly. One can do more out there than by remaining here shivering."

"There's Howell Hope down there. I suppose you've seen him. That's why you're going."

She looked from the open window down upon the graveled path beneath, and following her gaze I saw Howell's athletic figure clearly outlined in the glare cast from the burning hay stacks.

I pulled Lal from where she was hanging half way out of the center window. She was spurring each passer-by forward by her vehement appeals. There was a high wind blowing and her night dress was open at the throat, exposing the skin.

"What are you trying to do, you reckless child?" I cried with some heat; for her careless ways with herself worried me always. "You will take a frightful cold. These nights are so chilly yet, and the wind is so high to-night. Here, put something around you."

I stopped to pin a garment up closely about her throat while she said excitedly:

"Oh, Peggy, not a thing can I do tied in here with this miserable sprained ankle. Why, why, must I be so helpless at such a time? John and his children will be burned alive. They have such poor facilities out there, and every little helps. I could be of some use if it weren't—oh! won't you help me down and along the path? I can do something, I know."

"My dear, you could do nothing. John and his children are in no danger. They are out of their rooms over the barn now, and it's too far, anyway, to catch fire. Stay here till I come back. I won't be gone long."

"Oh! but—" she remonstrated, as I reached the door, when Adelaide flung after me:

"There may be a sand-bar out on the lake. Why don't you and Howell Hope look it up?"

I heard the murmur of Lal's voice in a sharp reply as I ran down the stairs. There was no time to indulge in any hurt feelings when I could be of any assistance in curbing the jets of red fire that were doing their best to spread destruction all around us.

I flew down the path leading to the barn, knocking against some one as I passed through it to get to the rear. I

didn't stop to apologize, but the recipient of my brusque salute turned sharply and came abreast of me. I recognized a woman from the village whom I had always disliked. Her eyes were close together and she had a nose that was a caricature of that organ in that it was long and snooping and vile.

"Oh! it's you," she said, peering into my face as we passed along the row of stalls; "quite a blaze this time. And they can't find the fire-bug. What's your hurry? You can't do nothing. All the men are working like mad. But—oh! I see," as Howell's broad back loomed up in front of us a few feet away, "that's the magnet. Love's a greater fire than even these flames. And since your shipwreck—"

But I dashed wildly from the woman's side and made a reckless plunge toward Rafe, who stood near the fire with his sleeves rolled up and the perspiration running down his face.

"Look out!" he called, as I tripped on my dress skirt, the hooks and eyes of which had parted company in the back, and went down within three feet of one of the burning hay stacks.

Barely a second elapsed before I was upright again, restored to equilibrium by a pair of strong arms, and Howell was brushing my skirt free from dirt.

"A close call, Peggy. Why are you out here? You can do no good. We've got to let it burn out. As long as Nineveh doesn't care about improvements it is going to lose money. Look at that," and he pointed to two of the firemen returning from our lake a few rods distant with two little rubber buckets from which the water was being nicely spilled as they made their way to the fiercely blazing hay stacks.

"How disgraceful," I murmured, caring little for the fire or anything much now. I was wondering how many of the crowd scattered in groups around us had noticed that Howell and I were together, and were commenting on the fact.

The shadows dancing around us assumed horrible proportions to me, and they seemed an evil portent of what was to come. I saw Florence Westlake among a knot of others

near and smiled at her as I nodded to what Howell was saying. Did her lip curl as she looked at me? Or was I allowing my imagination to run riot? Was it my fancy, or did she really say something in an undertone to the others, causing them to glance at me with marked curiosity and then turn their heads away?

"Florence!" I called, starting forward; but she was moving away with her friends, and I stopped short as if I had received a blow in the face.

"What is it?" asked Howell, who had followed me, "and where?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," I answered hurriedly. "I am going back to the house. I can do nothing. I thought I could."

"I'll go back with you. They can't do anything more. I—"

"No, no; please don't, Howell. I can get back alone. Indeed, I'd rather," as he took my elbow to help me over the mass of things lying about.

"Why?" and he looked at me blankly.

"Why?" repeated Lal's voice behind us, "because she is afraid she will be giving people more food for talk. As if they could be saying much meaner things than they've been saying to-night."

"How did you get out here, Lal?" I demanded, as I remembered her foot and saw that she was almost wholly dressed.

"I got Ned Brown to carry me," she confessed, with a glimmer of laughter in her eyes. "I got dressed as soon as you left. Adelaide was unbearable and wouldn't leave the room. I couldn't put her out, she's so big and strong, so I grabbed this cane of Roy's after calling to Ned when I saw him pass under the window. He came to the back door and I asked him if he wanted to do a noble deed. He said he was hurrying to display his nobility at the fire, so I begged him to take me along. Such a big, hearty fellow as he is, and he picked me up like a bundle of rags. I had to laugh.

But I told him to put me down in the barn, for I knew you'd frown if you saw me."

"I? But just think of the others who saw you," I said.

"Um. Just think of them. The fact that I was in Ned Brown's arms all the way from our door to the barn will be all over the village to-morrow. I'm going to keep strict watch and see just how many people 'cut' me."

"They won't 'cut' you; people aren't fools," said Howell, with a shrug.

"They're worse than fools. If they're mean enough to cut Peggy for what she couldn't help, they'll cut me for what I could help as long as either of us outrages their sense of propriety. Bah! the littleness of it!"

"Who has been cutting Peggy?" asked Howell quickly.

"Everyone. It seems to be a wholesale agreement to make things as disagreeable as possible for her. I heard Nella Ahlers say to-night—she passed right under my window with some others—that she didn't propose to imperil her reputation, that people were only too ready to damn her if she had anything to do with the North girls; they were high flyers anyway. Yes, that's the word she used, though I don't see where it comes in myself. Oh, she said a lot of nice things about me, too—said it was no doubt entirely through me that Peggy's good name was gone forever; I had always held complete dominion over her, and that—"

"That's quite enough," said Howell, with the stern set of his brows I knew so well; "you're only making Peggy wince with every word you utter, and I have learned sufficient to attend to matters. It's damp here in this grass. You'll catch cold in your sprain. We'll go up to the house. Peggy, take her other arm. I shan't attempt to carry you. I—"

"Oh! but you must," said Lal promptly; "my foot is aching at a two-forty rate. We'll get back quicker if you carry me. I'm tired, too. I'm an awful nuisance, I know, Mr. Howell Hope, and you are inwardly saying sweet things about me and it was the uttermost folly for me to come out; but take me back and let me go to bed."

She gave a whimper like a tired child and leaned against me. She shivered a little, and taking off my shawl I wrapped it round her. Howell lifted her in his arms. She was a light load for him.

A few came running toward us as Howell proceeded with his burden, but they fell back as soon as it was learned that this unusual means of locomotion was because of Lal's sprained ankle.

The distant expression upon the faces of all the village people and our friends froze the blood in my veins. Reputation was dearer to me than aught else, and I realized that now, through no fault of mine, I had not a shred which I might call my own.

Not a word was spoken on the way to the house. When it was reached I lighted the gas in the lower hall and, together, Howell and I helped Lal upstairs to her room. Then I let Howell out at the lower door.

I thought it a little odd that he should look at me so closely when he turned to say good-night as he stepped out onto the walk. The fires from the now completely demolished hay stacks burned low, the people were dispersing and passing around the other side of the house. We could hear them talking over the hedges. The moon was streaming down upon us, and I saw that Howell's mind was preoccupied for all he scanned me so closely.

"Good-night, Peggy," he said as he took my hand and held it a moment; "I can never forgive myself for the part I played Sunday in all this—in all this talk that has come of it. But we shall fix things."

He looked away a moment, then pulled himself together as with an effort.

"You'll get a note from me in the morning," he said. "Answer it in person, will you? I can't tell now just what time I can meet you, but I'll write the first thing in the morning. Good-night—dear."

He turned abruptly and walked across the lawn, disappearing among the trees down by the lake.

Wondering at the tender term by which he had addressed me for the first time in his life, I went in and closed the door.

CHAPTER XVI

In the 11 o'clock delivery came Howell's expected note. John had brought it over from the postoffice with the other mail. I had been trembling all morning with the prospect of it, and when it was handed me I hurried to my room and locking the door I fell to reading eagerly.

It was brief enough, simple enough and told me nothing new. I raced through the few lines once, then steadied my hand with an effort and endeavored to read it a second time with an outward semblance, at least, of composure.

DEAR PEGGY (I read)—

I can't get off before 5 this afternoon, as I have to take a party of politicians from New York over to Thor's Island. But at 5:30 will you meet me at our place along the lake path? I want to talk to you. Yours,

HOWELL.

There was nothing in such a communication to make the blood leap to my face, but leap it did. Not a word to suggest an unsuspected tenderness; nothing to indicate that Howell loved me. Yet I had always been a stickler for the way a letter began and ended. A salutation and signature meant much to me. And Howell had never signed himself "Yours" heretofore.

Was it the beginning of the dawn of his love for me? Was he learning the lesson he said he was trying to learn? And—I shrank from my own hopes. Was I such a shaft of monumental conceit as to believe he cared for me? How I read and reread his letter! How I searched the lines for some hidden meaning! Imagination ran riot. One moment

confident that he loved me and was about to tell me so, another, satisfied that it was a bitter mirage of happiness, I finally resolved to conjecture no longer, but wait and see what our meeting brought forth.

I dressed myself with unusual care that afternoon, putting on a blue waist I knew Howell admired and catching a deep collar of fine lace over my shoulders. I caught myself coloring as I surveyed myself in the mirror, bringing my hair about the temples until it crinkled.

Oh, girlish vanity! That we should spend so much time upon personal adornment for love of the opposite sex. There is a pitiful side to the sight of a young girl arraying herself with flushed cheeks for her lover's eyes. But so it has always been and always will be until, perhaps, the bachelor maid is an established fact and has so completely merged herself in masculinity as to set a minimum value upon man's admiration.

Lal called me as I passed her room on my way out.

"Très-belle," she said as she caught my hand to draw me down on her knee; "but wherefore this gala aspect? You are not going out?"

"Not far. I—"

"Oh, I see. Just down by the lake. Well, here's a red rose for the crowning touch—in your hair."

She selected a great Jacqueminot from a heap that lay on her table, freshly gathered.

"White would be more appropriate," I suggested as she caught the luscious half-blown rose in my hair.

"You don't suppose I've Howell in mind for this, do you? The red rose is a reminder of me. It's my life and the color of my love for anyone I love as I do you, Peggy. Here's a white one. Isn't it calm and mild? That expresses Howell's love for you. I'll put it at this gathering of frou-frou at your breast. Doesn't it look dainty there? There you are with Howell's color and mine. Think of him whenever you glance down at this one: it will be often, I'll warrant, and once in a while remember me when you feel the red one tickling you behind the ear. Now—you look lovely,

and if he doesn't tell you so this afternoon he's as blind as Milton. What time are you coming back? It's nearly half-past 5."

"In a little while. Why?"

"Nothing. Only I heard mother say we would have dinner to-night at 7. Rafe comes in on an earlier train."

She returned to the book she had been reading and I went out to keep my tryst with Howell. It was a few minutes later than the time specified when I reached our rendezvous. I saw I was the first to be at the fallen maple. Nettled at this, I retraced my steps a little to give Howell a chance to arrive while I was out of immediate range. I had not gone far when I heard his birdlike whistle and turned back hastily.

He came hurrying along and leaping over the tree was at my side in a moment. His face was flushed from running. He was in his sailor suit of rough cloth and to me he had always looked particularly attractive in this. He looked at me closely, I thought, but he made no comment on my dress other than:

"I caught the blue of your dress among the trees and I was afraid you had turned back. I'm late, I know. I'm so sorry, but I couldn't help it. The tide was against us coming back and we were quite a time getting in. But we didn't get stalled on any sand-bar."

He laughed a little as he said this, and I saw a latent look of mischief in his eyes.

This was so unlike him that it hurt to the quick that he should so jest about a matter he knew not only that I felt keenly, but that it augured seriously for me. I looked up quickly and said indignantly as well as reproachfully:

"It is indelicate of you to joke about such a—such a thing. I wouldn't have thought it of you."

The blood of mortification heating my face told him more than any words, and he was penitent in a moment.

"Oh, forgive me, Peggy! I didn't mean it. I didn't mean to joke, really. But the thought crossed my mind of what a time there would have been if I had landed those poli-

ticians high and dry on a sand-bar till to-morrow morning. And there's a convention to-night in New York that they've got to attend. A mighty good thing it wasn't a repetition of our adventure, hey, Peggy?"

A joviality that ill became him seemed to have seized Howell. There was laughter in his usually thoughtful eyes and a gayety that while not appearing at all forced, did not rest naturally upon him.

I began to feel a dignity I had never had to call into prominence before. I looked at him as I said:

"If you have brought me out here only to jest, Howell, I am going back to the house. I don't think I know you in this mood of to-day."

I turned away, disappointed. My heart was very heavy and I felt I wanted to creep back to my room for a comforting cry. I had never loved him so much as at this moment when I seemed to realize the helplessness of the whole thing and how useless it was to court a delusion.

The stinging tears had already sprung to my eyes when I heard his voice and felt his firm hands upon my shoulders.

"Just a moment, Peggy."

He turned me in the narrow pathway and was looking down into my eyes that suddenly were as clear as his own.

"How heartless you must think I am," he said, and the blue of his eyes deepened; "and I asked you to meet me this afternoon simply because my heart was so full of a certain subject—"

Whether I was looking at him too searchingly or whether the tell-tale light I felt springing to my eyes was evident to him, I don't know. But his own looked beyond me a moment. Then a smile brightened his face. He seemed to take a fresh plunge, as it were, into his subject.

"Perhaps you didn't notice the way I looked at you last night, Peggy. But you've set me to thinking lately and—oh, somehow I can't help seeing your pretty eyes wherever I go, and last night I went out on the lagoon and looked up at the stars and reflected how close onto twenty-eight I'm getting

and," hurriedly, "don't you think we could settle down now, Peggy?"

He had talked at breakneck speed and I looked at him in amazement. He must have seen the wonder gathering upon my face, for he went on quickly:

"I know it's an awkward way to ask a girl to marry you, but I've never been very much in the sentimental line. But I honestly mean what I say, Peggy, and if you'll take me for better or worse, chiefly worse, I'll do everything I can to make your life happy. You won't—" he paused and laid both hands upon my shoulders again.

"What?" I asked, trying to look up at him.

"You won't mind if I was a bit rough in my way of expressing it?" he queried.

"Oh, no. Of course not, Howell."

I was thinking deeply. Was this the declaration of love I had expected when the time came that Howell could ask me honestly to be his wife? Hardly. I was not prone to diagnose my own feelings closely upon any subject. I was anything but analytical. A normal temperament is never given to self-dissection. But like a flood, question after question assailed me from every side, and surged through my perturbed brain.

For a few minutes the tender sweetness of the thought that I had won after long waiting the gift of Howell's love thrilled my whole being and shut out every other suggestion. I ventured to lay my hand on the sleeve of the rough coat of the lad so dear to my heart.

"Howell," I began, and he took my other hand as he noticed the difficulty I had in proceeding.

"Well, Peggy?"

"Has it been very hard for you to learn to love me, Howell? Has—"

"Why, my dear little girl, didn't I tell you only a short while ago that I felt I must love you in time? That I cared more for you each day? That—that, why Peggy, didn't you have any faith in my word?"

"Of course I did; but—"

"Come, come, don't draw such a long face. Perhaps you are repenting your bargain—but, by ginger! you haven't even given me a promise and here I am taking it for granted that you'll marry me. Why, you haven't answered my question. Aren't you going to?"

"What?" I questioned, determined to hear it over again.

"Why—you know—marry, settle down, have a home of our own. Will you, Peggy?"

"Are you quite sure you want me?" I asked, not daring to look up into his eyes, my own were so suffused with happiness.

"Doesn't it sound like it when a man offers his name to a girl?"

Still I was dissatisfied. A strange feeling of emptiness pervaded my heart. I drew a little nearer and found the strength to lift my eyes for a moment to look into his own. They were regarding me, I thought, curiously, but an expression of great kindness had deepened upon his face.

"Do you—love me, Howell?" I managed to articulate, as my eyes again fell before his own.

He did not speak immediately, but put his arm around my shoulder while with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand, he caught me gently under the chin. Then he said:

"Will you not trust me, Peggy?"

"Yes, Howell," very low.

"Do you think that I can make you happy?"

"No one but you could."

"Then—then will you marry me this afternoon, now? Right away?"

"Now? Right away?" I repeated, and drew back from him in amazement.

"Why not? What is there to prevent? We are not ten minutes' walk from Dr. Carson's house. I know just where to put my hands on Kit Murray, and he and the doctor's sister will act as witnesses. And see here"—he drew a small [illegible]om an inner pocket and opening it, disclosed a plain [illegible]ing; "I bought this this morning early. I didn't

think you'd be hard-hearted enough to refuse me, and—and if you'll just come round to the minister's with me and let me slip this on this finger, why, you'll be Mrs. Howell Hope in less time than it takes to—"

While he had been talking I had been wondering why he did not kiss me. Was ever a girl courted without a demonstration of some sort by her lover? A kiss from Howell before marriage would have meant so much. Afterwards, of course, it didn't matter, I supposed; men had to kiss their wives as a duty. But now had he but taken me once lovingly in his arms as I had so often imagined he would, had he kissed me ever so lightly I could have reconciled the thought of this proposal to go immediately to the minister.

"You don't like the idea?" broke in upon my musings.

"We couldn't go this way, Howell," I remonstrated; "why, look, this is last season's waist, and—"

"A hang for the waist. You haven't a thing you look prettier in. Look at me. Are you ashamed of me in these clothes?"

"Howell! How can you ask such a thing?"

"Well, you'll make me think it is nothing but that if you don't give in. Come, my girl, let's settle it to-day. We'll talk it over now as we start for the parsonage. If you change your mind before we get there we'll turn back. Come, that's fair, isn't it?"

He caught hold of my arm and we started along the path. We had not proceeded far when Howell gave a whistle of jubilation.

"The very thing," he exclaimed, as he caught sight of our skiff, the *Sultan*, moored under the bushes; "we'll row across in this to the other side and walk through the fields to the parsonage."

How he laughed and chattered as his Herculean strokes cut the water, skimming us to the other side. Blind indeed would I have been not to have seen he was aiming to check my thoughts from too deep revolving.

"You'll think me 'verra canny,' as the Scotch say, Peggy. For I've thought out our entire course. After we're mar-

ried I'll take you back to the house and you can tell them quietly what you've done. Bring what you need for your immediate use and ask leave to return later for your other things."

"Where will you be while I am doing this?"

"I shall be outside. When you join me we'll go to the Wilson House for the night and perhaps in two weeks or so we shall be able to run down to New York for a week's jaunt and see something. I can't promise any more of a honeymoon, Peggy. I'm not a rich man."

"I know that, Howell. Do you think that makes any difference to me? I am willing; you know I shall be happy to wait and work with you."

"Thank you, dear." He leaned forward on his oars to look at me.

But I did not return his glance. It all seemed so strange, so unreal to me. To think I was calmly drifting toward marriage, that I would be united to Howell within half an hour, within the next twenty minutes, seemed more than I could grasp.

We secured the boat among the bushes and started on our short trip across the fields. Once, Howell stopped.

"Do you want to go back, Peggy?" he asked, with his hand on my shoulder.

"No—not unless you wish it."

"I have already told you my wishes. Hello, there's Kit."

Sure enough, there at the cross roads, a few yards this side of the minister's house, stood Kit Murray, trying to look as if he had not been waiting patiently for us to appear. He bowed in an embarrassed fashion to me and grinned at Howell.

"You was a long time gettin' to the point—this point, I mean," he said heartily, indicating the cross roads; "I just saw the minister go into the house from the main road."

And so it came to pass that this most impromptu of bridal parties was assembled before Nineveh's foremost minister in less than half an hour after Howell had asked me to be his wife. We were a very quiet group in the sunny east room

of the old parsonage, and notwithstanding the celerity with which everything had occurred I realized the solemnity of the occasion full well.

As I look back upon it all now I cannot help sighing at the lack of everything girlish and festal about that wedding. With but Lal's two roses to brighten the otherwise sad marriage ceremony, with but their fragrance to sweeten this momentous occurrence in my life, I heard the final word spoken which united Howell and me for life.

I had not been able to keep back the tears occasioned by the gravity of the position. But Howell's eyes were clear and bright, and he looked so manly as he stood by my side. And when he turned to place the gold band upon my finger there was something like reverence in the expression upon his face. It was then he took me in his arms and kissed me gently upon the lips as he said for no one but me to hear:

"God bless you, Peggy, dear."

It was only when we were leaving that I experienced the first disagreeable feature of my wedding. Dr. Carson, who was a kind man, very often said, without thinking, the wrong thing in the wrong place. Now he grasped Howell's hand and shaking it heartily, said:

"You're an honorable fellow, Howell. I wish there were more like you in Nineveh."

Flushing to his temples, Howell gave me one quick glance, and saying, "Thanks, doctor; you won't have to look far. There's Kit," drew my arm within his own and led me from the house.

We crossed the dusty road in silence, Howell carefully brushing my skirt as we gained the fields. It was not until the skiff was reached that anything was said. After I had gained my seat in the *Sultan* and Howell had taken the oars I looked at him for the first time, and addressed him.

CHAPTER XVII

"You have married me to save my good name," I said, biting my lips.

"Are you going to mind what people say?" he asked, still with the cheery note in his voice. "I thought you were too sensible for that."

"Opinions, while they hurt, cannot do so much damage as facts. And I have learned this fact—that circumstances have forced you to give me the protection of your name. And you haven't loved me; you pretended.

I covered my face with my hands, bitterly repenting the blindness that I had courted when I thought I had awakened to the sudden realization of my hopes in my longing for Howell's love.

To my ears his reply came in maddening unison with the keen stroke of his oars:

"I have pretended nothing. You are bound to see things differently."

He caught the oars in the oarlocks suddenly and moved to the seat beside me.

"Peggy, why—my dear, we mustn't begin like this."

With his arm about me and a hand resting upon my hair he went on:

"What we have done, Peggy, I believe is for the best. Do you think I could have been cad enough after having accidentally placed your good name in jeopardy to have allowed you to rest forever under a suspicion? It would have been so in this little place. People in small places are so small themselves. We have settled matters promptly, once and for all, by getting married. Everybody's mouth will be closed. And as for us, our own individual selves, we must be fools if we are not happy. I shall learn to care for you, Peggy, surely. Are you not willing to make the experiment

and wait for my heart to change from simple affection to genuine love?"

There was no resisting such gentle, kindly persuasion.

"You are such a dear fellow, Howell," I said in answer to his arguments, looking into his smiling eyes; "forgive me again. This is the last you'll hear about this matter. You may learn to love me as I do you, but until you do I shall never speak of this again."

"That's right. Now, give me a kiss to prove we are friends once more."

I lifted my face and a kiss lost itself somewhere between my chin and lips. We both laughed then, for it was an awkward enough procedure. Howell remarked that inexperience like that would be remedied.

Thus we reached the other side and leaving him at the foot of the garden, I went up to the house. I could not control a little inward trembling of excitement at the strangeness of the whole thing. But I was not frightened at all. What girl with a newly acquired husband ever was? Even in the very face of Aunt Marion's sarcastic anger I knew I would be unmoved.

I was free from the yoke at last, free from the unsympathetic atmosphere she shed. I could pick up my trifling possessions and walk calmly out of the house to my husband if her words provoked me too far. And then—the thought of Lal made me stop with my foot on the lower round of the veranda steps. How would it be with her when once we were separated? How would she bear the coldness of it all? Though living in the same town, we were far apart. After an unusually severe encounter at arms with her mother I would not be in the house for her to fly to.

She most likely would be denied a visit of more than a day with me. How would it all end? Would repeated outbreaks produce a climax, causing Lal to take matters into her own impetuous hands? And yet, the fact of my marriage must be told immediately. "I'll be with her nine-tenths of the time," I resolved to myself, as I entered the

house; "that may avert a few storms. I don't care about the others, but how will she take it?"

I found them all in the sitting room awaiting Rafe's return from the city. Adelaide was reading a bilious looking novel, Aunt Marion the newspaper, and Lal was playing the piano in the helter-skelter way she had when she didn't feel musically inclined, but wished to give her fingers exercise.

"Where have you been?" asked Aunt Marion, looking up for a moment.

"I have just come from the parsonage."

"Why were you there?" The paper was lowered altogether.

"I went there to get married," I said with exaggerated calmness.

"Married! Who?" gasped Aunt Marion.

"Married!" ejaculated Lal, holding onto a handful of keys in her consternation. "What on earth have you done that for?"

"It was the only thing left for her to do," said Adelaide, though traces of amazement were still visible upon her face.

"You don't mean to tell me you have married that Hope fellow?" said Aunt Marion, clipping each word off with measured distinctness.

I looked at her a few moments in silence. Lal had risen from the piano, and, standing by me, expressed her dumfoundedness in her whole attitude.

"Howell Hope and I were married half an hour ago by Dr. Carson," I said slowly. "As Adelaide says, it was the only thing for me to do. My name had been imperiled and the only way to hush up gossip was to take Howell's name. He has been very kind. I hope you will—"

"I believe it was a trumped-up affair from the first," said Aunt Marion, with suspicion lighting her eyes; "you arranged matters so that you could get your way and marry him in spite of my disapproval. I've known of girls hounding men before now, but—"

"How dare you accuse me of such a thing?" I cried in-

dignantly; "you know as well as I it was an accidental occurrence all through—"

"Oh, yes! You never met him by appointment, I presume, even before Sunday's escapade. You never wrote to him or encouraged his attentions?"

Aunt Marion's tones were at their nastiest. It was with difficulty that I could keep my temper.

"Yes, I did meet him and write to him, and now I have married him. Is there anything more you have to say to me? I'm going to gather my belongings together, with your permission, and go with my husband."

"Oh, Peggy!" Lal's hand caught my own and she was looking intently in my face. "Don't tell me you're going away. You are not going to leave me—oh, Peggy, not that! Don't say you're going to leave me!"

"I must, dear. Howell is waiting. I'll see you very soon again—always."

"You must realize," came Aunt Marion's stiletto-like tones, "that there is a great difference now that you are married. I shall not, of course, be so unwise as to forbid intercourse between you and Laura. You would see each other in defiance of me, even were I to do so. I wish to save you that transgression. But, frankly, you will never be welcome here again, since you have so openly gone in direct opposition to my expressed wishes. I do not forbid you the house. I must always remember it was my husband who brought you here and gave you a home, and I shall regard his memory in not gainsaying you admittance. But—"

"Thank you for that concession," I murmured.

"But," continued the metallic voice, "you will be tolerated, only, when you do come, and Laura will probably be the only one who will care to see you. As for the man you have married—he, of course, is entirely out of the question. Never bring him here with the hope that he will be allowed to enter."

"You certainly have made matters plain enough. I cannot fail to understand. Though it is on sufferance I come here in the future, I would do it a hundred times over if it

was the only way by which I could see Lal. Believe me, I shall not disturb any of the rest of you. As for my husband" (how I gloried in the word to myself), "he hasn't the slightest inclination to know any of you any better."

"It is a strange thing—your professedly strong attachment for Laura," commented Mrs. North, in a tone that suggested she might tell volumes as to the key to the riddle; "I never have understood it."

"Possibly if you had made the attempt at understanding her nature you would have known many more things than you do."

"Have you the impertinence to imply that I have been lax in my discipline?"

"I imply nothing. But I have learned one thing in my girlhood passed in a family with as many different types as the five of us have represented. You cannot bring children up on the same plan as weeds in a field, to flourish as they like. Even a gardener shows discrimination among his flowers. An orchid requires a different cultivation than that given a daisy. If a high-bred flower is nurtured the same as a hardy plant, the high-bred flower dies. You have cared for our physical training, Aunt Marion, as few women ever care for the health of their children. In sickness of body you never left anything undone. Oh, if you only had neglected that a little and taken each of us differently and ministered to our mental wants! Roy would probably be among us to-day; dissension would never have been known in this house; certainly Lal and you would never have been so constantly at odds; certainly I never would have disobeyed you had you placed yourself in sympathy with my nature. But I am not one of your own children, and I am going to my own home now. It doesn't matter for me. But just for Lal's sake—"

"Not another word, Peggy, please," Lal interposed; "it is too late for transformations. To carry out your own simile, you can't train a flower to bend a new way to the sun when it has been accustomed to another way all its life."

Aunt Marion looked at me with white passion in her eyes.

"When you have children of your own I hope you will remember your homily to me, and teach them what I neglected to teach you—respect for your superiors."

"The experience of others is our advantage—if we choose to look at it that way. I shall remember," I answered quietly.

Adelaide raised her heavy body from the lounge and lumbered over to her mother, exhaling a ghastly scent of heliotrope over me as she passed. She wore sachet bags about her person and the perfume was suffocating at times.

"You can't expect anything from people not your relatives, mompsus," she soothed, with the air of monopoly that was partially her success with her mother. "Margaret has never been one of us."

Rafe entered at this juncture.

He stopped as he encountered the different expressions upon our faces.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, stepping over to his mother, kissing her and passing along the confection to Adelaide.

"Nothing. Only Margaret was married this afternoon," said Aunt Marion in set tones from her chair.

Rafe wheeled around to me.

"That fellow!" he demanded peremptorily. "You dared to—"

"Not that tone to me now, Rafe North," I said firmly; "if you ever had any authority over me you have less than any now."

He paused in the delivery he was about to give the words rushing to his lips. He spoke quietly when he did address me. I would have been callous indeed had I not felt the sting of his words, though I knew they were not necessarily true.

"You have married beneath you," he said, "and yet I once heard a minister say it always angered him when peo-

ple used that term in speaking of a marriage where the participants were in different walks of life, for he said, 'they have gone to their own company.' That is what you have done. But I hope you understand that your company cannot be our company if you go among the fisher people to choose it."

"Your mother has enlightened me as to her future attitude. There is a marked similarity in what you both think, so you need not go into detail."

"You may stay to dinner," said Aunt Marion coldly, as she saw me move toward the stairs to go to my room.

"Thank you, but I will not stay. I have remained long enough as it is," I said, with as much dignity as I could assume.

I went out, knowing that Lal was at my heels. When we reached my room she closed the door and threw her arms around me.

For a moment she held me so, tight to her slender body. Then she kissed me a little more fervently than usual and put me from her.

"You don't want many things now," she said, proceeding to gather up a tooth brush and my diary, putting them in a handbag she brought from the closet. We had each kept journals for years, though Lal's was an extensive affair, while mine only rose to the dignity of a good-sized note book.

"I'll do your packing to-night, Peggy. Send for your trunk to-morrow. I'll get John to take it over in the carryall and I'll sit in front with him. We'll come over in the morning and I'll stay to luncheon. I don't mind if you only have fish. I'll love it for your sake, to-morrow."

"I don't know about your packing, Lal. Your genius in that direction, if you have any, needs developing," I said, while I dried my eyes with the edge of the garment I was taking out of the bureau.

"Lydia'll help me, so you needn't fear for your dainty lingerie. I'll promise not to put your shoe blacking in the *same compartment* as your hat. Here, Mrs. Hope—how

did you dare to elope?—do you want this scented soap—or the plain? Did you ever hear such unconscious rhyming? What are you blushing at? Oh! your new name. I was the first to address you by that, wasn't I?"

"I'll take the plain, please," I said as I relieved her of a few of the articles she was bringing to me in battalions.

"You might think you were going to a wilderness from what you are taking," commented she.

"We are going to the Wilson House for to-night. You know they never have anything much there. Their soap and toilet articles would disgrace a western hotel, I am sure."

"Are you happy, Peggy?" she asked with the irrelevancy for which she was noted.

"I am married to the man I love, Lal, and I'm going to be very happy, dear. But for leaving you, there is scarcely a thing lacking for my contentment. You are coming to see me often, aren't you?"

"All the time. I shall be at home very little."

"Who knows but what you may be self-supporting in a little while? Then you and Howell and I could rent some rooms and keep house by ourselves. Wouldn't that be ideal?"

"I should love to be with you," she admitted, "but—"

"And Howell too," I said anxiously; "you don't dislike him, Lal?" I was never quite sure what moment she was going to change in her attitude toward people.

"Oh, no. Howell's harmless. Good gracious! what put such an idea into your head? But—"

She paused again and I looked up in time to see the expression of indomitable resolution I knew so well settling upon her face.

"Not in this place, Peggy colleen," she said with merry emphasis, "not in Nineveh. I shall live. I don't see how you can want to vegetate."

"But where?" I began.

"Oh, I don't know yet. But you know changes are inevitable. If they don't come to you, you ought to make

them yourself. Change, any kind of change, is an education; for good or evil. Therefore, take change. Never let slip any bit of education."

"That's a purely Lallette maxim. You sweep in everything. You should eliminate the evil."

"Don't agree with you. Even evil teaches you something, if it only teaches you to stick to the good."

"The dinner bell has rung for the second time," I said as the chimes of the gong filtered up to us; "go down, dear. I shall slip out the side entrance. Howell has been waiting all this time by the lake for me, poor fellow."

"He'll think we have spirited you away. He may be up here demanding his wife. I wish he would."

The light of prospective excitement danced in her eyes. She dearly loved to watch people during scenes of great moment. She said they formed such perfect tableaux and suggested other situations. "How will you use them?" I had often asked her curiously. "What lesson can you draw from watching people like that?" And she had laughed as she replied, "No telling; but suppose I were in such a scene, later, real or mimic; don't you think I'd know how to act better?"

We went downstairs softly together, and she let me out at the porticoed entrance.

"To-morrow morning," she said, as I kissed her as a mother kisses the child she leaves for a long time; "get Howell off early to the boats."

I promised and waving her a good-bye with my satchel, ran swiftly down the graveled walk.

Howell, patient fellow, was sitting astride of the skiff tracing figures with his jack knife.

"Was I long?" knowing full well I had been ages.

"I thought you had deserted me and taken the 7:30 to New York;" he looked up to laugh his sunny laugh; "how did you make out? They didn't say anything to make you feel badly, I hope."

"Oh, yes, plenty enough things said, but I didn't let them *affect me. How* could I, knowing I had you? I'm awfully

hungry and I didn't stay to dinner, though you might have thought by the length of time I took that I did."

"Well, then, my little girl, let me help you in here."

He lifted me with all the ease of the Hercules he was, and settling opposite me, took the oars.

"I am going to row down under the bridge by the mill dam, out into the lagoon and around home," he said in answer to my surprised looks. "I'll give the boat to Frank then to row back again to the boat house. Then we'll have only a few blocks to walk to the Wilson House. We'll send for your trunk to-morrow."

"John will bring it over in the morning. He's going to drive Lal over to see me."

"That will be pleasant. I'll tell Frank to get my room at the house fixed up a bit to-night for you girls to have to yourselves to-morrow. There are so many people in the house, but it will be better than the formality of a hotel, where everyone is so curious. At the house they are all kind-hearted folks, and they won't annoy you like they would at the hotel."

As we emerged from under the bridge we heard a laugh from above. Looking up, on the right bank stood Ned Marston gazing down upon us. I had not seen him since the morning Howell had laid him low for insulting me.

Now he grinned at us from his very evident vantage ground. Howell never could have reached him had he tried ever so hard. The scurvy fellow was quite safe in flinging anything at us he chose, either verbally or practically.

"Spliced, eh?" he yelled down with a fiendish grin of enjoyment at his advantageous position. "I've just seen Kit Murray and he says—"

Then followed a string of words, coarse and revolting in their allusions. I kept my eyes lowered and was thankful when, by added strength to Howell's long strokes, he had very soon carried us beyond reach of our tormentor.

"There's only one excuse for that beast," said Howell, gravely, as we left the banks behind us and skimmed the lagoon; "he has become half crazed from cigarettes. He

has been acting very peculiarly for some time. But he's a bullock in strength and he can do harm yet. Still," he added reflectively, "I hardly think it will be in our direction again."

Not long afterwards I had occasion to recall his words.

CHAPTER XVIII

We were to have an early breakfast the following morning and go over to the house in time for Howell to join his father and brother when they put out in the *Halcyon*. It was 6 o'clock when we left the hotel dining rooms and walked down the shaded street from the Wilson House. No one was astir, for Nineveh was a lazy little place and summer visitors did not import a briskness to anything but trade.

We had not proceeded a dozen yards, however, before we perceived a half-grown lad skurrying toward us, his face alight with the importance of news.

"I was going to the hotel for youse two," he said, coming to a short stop before us; "I know'd you wuz there, but there was some as didn't, so I said I—"

"Well," said Howell, impatiently "what is it, now you've found us?"

"What you think? Another fire by the Holy Smoke! An' it wuz your lodgin's too as—"

"Good God!" ejaculated Howell, while I stared breathlessly at the boy, "when did it happen? Why wasn't I told? Couldn't anyone have come and roused me? Dolts—you, why didn't you come when it would have been some good to tell me?"

The boy shuffled away from us.

"It only broke out at 4 o'clock. It wuz an awful blaze. Everybody helped. The fire got a hot box before

it 'd gone a block. An' so we fellers had to run back an' forth with water from the Bay. An'—"

"Well—what next, what next? Could they save any of the buildings?"

"Nope. Not a buildin'. They wuz lucky to get off with their night clo'es. Ole Marm Christopher—she fainted an' she's burned terrible. She—"

"Come, Peggy, I'm going to run. No, you'd better go back to the hotel. I'll be back later."

He started to run along the road.

"I shall come too," I answered, as I hurriedly picked up my petticoats and kept abreast of him. I had not been bred a country girl for nothing.

"What a wicked, wicked shame it is," I panted; "will they never find the fiend who is doing all this?"

"Not in Nineveh. We need new blood."

"I'd help in the lynching of the fellow if they catch him," I jerked out, my blood boiling as I thought of my own recent scare.

"I'd string him up with pleasure," answered Howell. "Oh, My God! Look at that," as we came in sight of the smoking pile of what had once been his home.

He leaned a little heavily upon me and I put my arm under him.

"It is too bad, dear. It is terrible, but bear up. Your father and brother have escaped. That is much to be grateful for."

"Yes, yes, I should remember that."

He straightened himself and we went forward.

We found Captain Hope and Frank sitting on the edge of a woodpile that had escaped the flames by being some distance from the house. They looked at us in a vacant sort Their faces, like others', were black with soot.

"Everything gone," said Frank despairingly; "not a thing saved."

"Not—" and I saw Howell's face turn a shade whiter under his bronzed skin.

"Yes. Every penny of it gone. Frank and I have been hunting for it, but it's no use. We'll never get it."

Then I reflected what Howell had told me the night before. His father had had an even thousand dollars in bills saved, which he kept by him always, having a deep-rooted distrust of banks. And they had vanished in the flames.

It was to have been divided between Howell and Frank as soon as either was married. Howell had realized the help this would be to him at the outset of his married life. It was indeed a blow that might have staggered any young couple with no more prospects than we had.

With some of what little money he had of his own Howell had paid our hotel bill. With the rest we were to have gone to New York for a brief trip in a week or so. Now this prospect was relegated to the past tense.

Before an hour the news of the latest conflagration had been disseminated throughout Nineveh. Had the buildings sheltering the fisher folk not been so remote from the main streets the news would have traveled faster. In another hour the early summer residents had had their sympathies touched and clothing enough was sent over to reinstate the unfortunates in something like respectability.

Howell borrowed a friend's light wagon and drove me over to his aunt's house. It was about three miles from Nineveh and a lonely place.

"I must leave you for the day, Peggy," he said, after greetings had been exchanged, and the state of affairs explained; "but I'll be home by six to-night and I'll send over word to John to bring Lal here as soon as he can. Then you'll have company. Now good-bye and don't worry. I must see if I can't cheer up the old man. It's an awful blow to him."

He kissed me good-bye and I watched him drive down the road. He turned to wave me another good-bye from the curve and I blessed him for his thoughtfulness.

Mrs. Tate, Howell's aunt, was a gloomy, apathetic woman who always gave me the horrors. She had one pas-

sion. It was the discussion of diseases, and no one could remain long in her presence without being treated to a discourse on the most horrible "ills that flesh is heir to." It was always a doubt in my mind, after listening to one of these diatribes, if I was in as sound health as I generally supposed myself to be.

She began soon after Howell had left.

"I hear you've ben havin' a terrible lot uv fires over in the village," she said, fixing her expressionless eyes upon me with something like interest. "It must be awful for you all. Those pore things that wuz routed out o' their beds this mornin' to set in the damp grass with their night clo'es on, will suffer fur it. You mark my word. Half on 'em will be down with dysentery an' grip. You see; an' perhaps typhoid an' malary. An' they ain't no joke. Why, when Hiram Newall cum down with it three years ago he wuz sicker'n a sick dorg. His wife—"

"Yes, we heard about it," I interrupted hastily, dreading a repetition of a case that had been distasteful to me to a degree by its unpleasant details.

"O, you couldn't a heard what his wife tole me. She said she wouldn't a tole anyone else, but she knew I wuz so interested in medicine and I allus cures her colds with my shrub teas. An' she said—"

Whereupon I was forced to listen to a dissertation on Hiram Newall's last illness with the outward calmness of a summer sky and the inward seething of a repressed fire. We must play the arrant hypocrite at times.

It was 11 o'clock when the old carry-all I knew so well drew up in front of the house and Lal came down the walk. I ran out of the door where I had been watching anxiously for an hour past.

"What a late hour for you to come. Why, I expected you—"

But I stopped short when I caught sight of her face. It was very white, though two pink spots burned in her cheeks and her eyes were red. The hand I took in mine was

cold. I put my arm around her without another word.

"Howell said your trunk must remain at the house until he knew just where you were going to settle," she said in a low voice, as John touched his cap and drove away.

"But your mother—"

"She made no demur."

Mrs. Tate met us at the door.

"Well, you do look awful under the weather, Miss North," was her greeting as she shook hands limply. "Your hands are as cold as ice. What's the matter? Shouldn't wonder ef you wuz a comin' down with the fever an' didn't know it. There's lots o' it about. Why, Jane Althouse has it bad, an' when her sister's child—"

"Frankly, Mrs. Tate, I'm in no mood to listen about people for whom I don't care a little bit. If you'll excuse me I'll go to Peggy's room."

She swept by Mrs. Tate without further ceremony. With a moment's whispered excuse I lingered, then darted after Lal. I had feared she would be a martyr to Mrs. Tate's recitals, but I might have known she would dispose of anyone quickly when she felt she could not listen sympathetically.

"What is it, dear girl?" I asked as I closed and locked the door behind us.

For answer she choked up, the blood mounted to her face, she leaned her head on her hand as she sat at the little table by the window, and began crying quietly but desperately.

"For heaven's sake, Lal, what is it?"

I was by her side, kneeling, and drew her poor head down to my shoulder. It was not her nature to cry unless very angry. There seemed to be more of utter weariness in this steady rain of tears than anything else. She clung to me tightly in an effort to control herself.

"Nothing new, Peggy. The old story, but it's getting to be such a fearful repetition that I can't stand it any longer."

"Aunt Marion? You haven't—"

"Yes. We had a terrible scene this morning. It was after Rafe had gone to the city. I don't know what it started about. Oh, yes, I do. She began by saying she hoped I'd never disgrace her as you had done; that marriage for me was my only redemption. Then she drifted to other subjects, and you know how she says things to arouse a very devil in one. I could have borne it, I think, and not answered more than twice, but Adelaide—" she paused and tried to speak without passion—"she came in and caught the drift of things. She always takes such a fiendish delight in egging mother on. She put in a word here and another one there; they said insulting things of you, of Howell, of everyone I cared anything at all about; they jeered at the thought of my ever amounting to anything myself; they laughed at my replies, they crushed every good emotion in me. They said I was odd; Adelaide said I posed; that I tried to be original; mother said I was an abortion. I never can forget that. Never. And Adelaide giggled, and I couldn't stand it. I seemed to let myself go all of a sudden as I had never let myself go before, and I said horrible things, the very first things that came into my head. Adelaide turned white and pretended she was aghast—that she was contaminated by my presence; and then mother ordered me out of the room and told me I was never to enter it again."

She paused a moment, her white lips quivering as she nervously bit at her handkerchief. I smoothed her hair, but said nothing.

"I am so tired of it all. There seems to be no rest from it. I went out to the barn to see John. He told me of the fire over at Howell's place. Isn't it awful? I feel so nervous. I'm sure not a place will be left in Nineveh. Perhaps we'll be burned down now that they began on our hay ricks. Then that would end everything. It might be a good way."

She looked out of the window as in a stupor.

"John harnessed Kitty and got me into the carry-all

someway and brought me over here. I don't want to go back."

"We won't talk about that now, dear," I said, as I brushed back her hair and grew hopeful now that I saw she felt better for having talked. "Instead, let's talk it all over and see if we can't devise some way out of it."

"What's the use? I wish I knew where Roy is. If I did I'd go to him and see if he couldn't help me in some way. But I haven't heard from him in two months."

"What was it you said to Aunt Marion and Adelaide this morning? You must have incensed your mother greatly to have her call you such a thing as a—a—"

"An abortion? Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I am one. I'm sure I'm getting to think I must be whatever she calls me. But it isn't a pretty name and one's own mother shouldn't—"

She leaned back wearily in her chair.

"What was it you said, Lal?" I questioned.

"What? To them? This morning? I really don't remember. I said so many things—but I think I said they were not only damning me, but damning themselves by all they said and did to me. And then—and then—I said I didn't care if I was damned."

She said the last word with vehemence between her shut teeth. Strong language was characteristic of Lal, but I had never known her to use the word "damn" promiscuously.

"That was an awful thing to say," I said as I looked at her.

"I know it. I felt awful. My thoughts and expressions are generally in accord."

"Well—" I began.

She looked up quickly.

"I feel better now. Let's wait till by and by to talk about this again. Let's get a book and go out under the apple trees back of the corn field and you read to me. It's nearly 11:30. We'll take luncheon out there. I don't want much; I'm not hungry."

So I told Mrs. Tate that Lal was not well and wanted to be alone with me, and tried to be as pleasant as I could in the telling of it. I won her good will, also a neat little hamper of farm goodies, and selecting the most sentimental love story I could find among the novels in the attic I guided my girl through the corn fields, over past the meadows where the cows were grazing, till we reached one of the prettiest, coolest spots in Nineveh, James Tate's apple kingdom at the end of his farm.

And there we ensconced ourselves and passed the afternoon away as only two girls with a book know how to do. To me it was an interesting story. I enjoyed the love scenes with a bitter sweetness of taste. They partly supplied what I had missed in Howell. I soon saw Lal's mind was not on what I was reading. She lay on her back among the old cushions I had brought out for her and gazed up among the apple boughs while I read on with one eye on her listening face—listening as it was to inner voices—and the other on the printed pages.

By and by she fell asleep, and I covered her gently with my light cape and kept the flies from annoying her, and read my story while I wondered how things would end for my girl. For end there must be and that soon. Lal could not long remain passive to mental suffering and I knew this was her cross.

It was 5 o'clock when the horn blew across the fields for the farm hands to cease work and prepare for dinner. The sound awakened Lal and she sat up, her eyes shining brightly.

"Such a rest," she said; "it was good of you to let me sleep and not feel insulted because I fell off to your drowsy tones. But my head aches and I'm not hungry."

"A surprising state for you to be in," I laughed; "you never eat enough anyway to keep a bird alive. How long do you think your nerves are going to sustain you?"

"Till they give out. Brilliant questions should receive brilliant replies."

She stood up and arranged her clothes. Her hair had become unbound and the setting sun shimmered on it as we walked along. I could not keep my eyes off it. It seemed like a mantle in its length and richness and the colors brought out by the sun were exquisite.

"I shall stay to tea and pay for it by listening to Mrs. Tate's pet hobby. If you and Howell will help me out I'll bless you. There he is now. He's early, isn't he?"

Howell was coming over the fields to meet us. I saw Lal watching him keenly as he greeted her and kissed me. She laughed as she saw his look of undisguised admiration when his eyes caught sight of her quivering hair in its loosened state.

" 'Titian Queen' ought to be your name. Didn't women of old who had hair this color accomplish a great deal, Peggy?" he asked, turning to me.

"With rare exception," I answered, "and yet there are many people who dare ridicule the red-headed ones."

"Everything has been ridiculed. Why should you think hair would escape? We can't help what covers our heads. We should help what our heads contain," said Lal, as she dodged from Howell's hand that was reached out to caress her glowing mane.

"How about the fire?" I asked, the question suggested by so much attention to the color of Lal's hair. "Have they found the incendiary?"

"They have more than a clew this time. I think by a day or two the authorities will be able to put their finger right on the fellow. He—"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, "who is it?"

"I'll tell you when I know for certain. I must keep quiet till then."

"I'm so afraid we'll be attacked again," said Lal; "if the man has grown so bold as to fire houses now, we are not safe."

"Well, the fire department has double watch now. And they have had the engine from Bay Beach sent over. I *think you're safe.*"

At 7 o'clock Howell drove Lal back to the park. She said good-bye to me with tears in her eyes.

"I'll see how things go to-morrow and let you know."

But I received no word from her the next day, nor the next. On the third day in the afternoon when I was helping Mrs. Tate with some patch work, John alighted from the bay mare and came up the walk.

I hurried out to him.

"No bad news, John?"

"No, Miss Margaret. Except Miss Lal has got a little fever, nothin' to speak on; but she doesn't feel well, didn't sleep last night or the night before, and calls for you. So the madam sends me over for you. Will you come over this afternoon?"

"Right away, as soon as I can get ready. But, John, you are sure Mrs. North sent for me?"

"Oh, yes'm. She gave me the order herself. I think she's real worrit about Miss Lal, though it's really nothin'. I was in her room to build a light fire this mornin' an' she's all right—only frettin' fur you. You'll come, miss?"

"Yes. I'll be over in Mr. Tate's buggy."

John departed and half an hour later I set out for the park.

As soon as I saw Lal, though she was in bed, I knew nothing but severe mental harassment was the matter with her. She brightened visibly when she saw me and I was glad I had come.

"Stay with me, Peggy. Stay with me all night. I shall be so sick, so sick if you leave me," she murmured, while I knelt beside her to kiss her as if I had been separated from her for years; "your hands are so cool, and when you're around I can stop thinking."

"What will Howell do?" I asked, having already resolved to send my boy a note to the effect that I would remain with Lal for a few days.

She made a moué.

"That's the bother of a husband. Can't he spare you

for any little time? He must. Tell him I'm sick, sick as a dog—"

"I believe you're as sick as a 'possum," I said, kissing her. "Well, I'll write him a note and get John to take it over with Mr. Tate's buggy. We must be a nuisance to more than one since our separation, Lal."

So the evening came and I borrowed one of Lal's night dresses and went to my own room, for she would not hear of me sleeping with her while in her restless condition.

"You'll be within call if I need you in the night," she said. "I won't have you think me a whole mountain of selfishness. Leave your door unbolted. I shall sleep with mine open."

I went to bed without seeing any of the others. Rafe had brought a close friend in from the city to remain all night, and till nearly half-past 10 the young men and Adelaide tried new songs on the piano in the sitting-room.

I did not hear Adelaide pass my room to go to her own, but that she did was evidenced by the fact that near 11 I felt an overpowering odor of strong perfume—orange blossoms, I think it was—drift in through my half-open door. Then I knew she was retiring for the night.

I slept like a child that night, but about 12 I awoke minute when I heard the great clock in the village striking the hour. The strokes sounded unusually deep-toned to me in the deathly stillness that seemed to envelop everything. I was provoked with myself for feeling so very much alive to every sound, and attributed it to the fact of a natural nervousness from the fires we had had.

I had been staring ahead of me, over the footboard of my bed, out of the window where a lone moonbeam was dancing among the top limbs of a great elm, as it flickered on my window sill. I closed my eyes presently, determined to fall again into healthy sleep, when my ears caught the slow, stealthy sound as of some one creeping along the corridor outside.

To say I was not frightened would be to tell a tremendous falsehood, but I lay perfectly still with my eyes wide open, waiting for developments. The sound, soft and slow, came nearer, apparently making my door the objective point. How I wished I had closed and bolted it! But who would have dreamed of midnight intruders? We had never been molested by housebreakers. If my life had depended upon my getting up and closing and locking my door I could not have saved it.

A frightful perspiration broke out over me as I saw my door pushed gently open and a figure in white crept in on all fours. Before I had time to think, the door was swiftly but noiselessly closed, without the figure rising to its feet, and a long, bare arm reached up and bolted it without moving from its crouching position.

My first impulse was to shriek at the top of my voice, but a second's thought made me realize who it was. I sat up in bed and gasped:

"Lal! In heaven's name why have you frightened the life out of me? Get back to bed."

"Sh—sh—" she said under her breath; "if you're one-half as frightened as I am, I'm sorry for you."

I could see her shaking in the moonlight as she retained her crouching attitude.

"What is it?" I demanded, involuntarily lowering my voice and starting out of bed.

"Quiet. Lie still," she commanded with her teeth closed. "You'll be killed if you don't."

I lay trembling but imploring her in a half whisper to get into bed with me.

"I can't. It's better to stay here till I can pull myself together to creep to mother's room. Let yourself out of bed easily and crawl over here to me. I can't talk to you at that distance. Quickly. We mustn't lose time."

I let myself softly down on the matting and hitched along toward her. She put her ear close to mine when I had reached her.

"There's a man outside the house," she whispered; "he's been there about fifteen minutes looking up at the windows. I think he must have a confederate, for he whistles every now and then softly. It sounds like a signal."

"Merciful powers! Am I to see a third fire?" I ejaculated.

Lal put her hand over my mouth.

"That's what I think—that it's the incendiary. He is only waiting to see if everything is safe before beginning his dastardly work. We must catch him red-handed. Rafe must be told immediately."

"Have you seen him?" I asked.

"Who? This fellow? Yes. He looks up at the windows, stands off under the trees and whistles. We want to be careful and not alarm him away. Don't stand up straight. If he catches sight of a night dress he'll know the family has been aroused. Keep on your hands and knees."

"Let me creep to Rafe's room," I said. "You get into bed. You'll take cold."

"So will you. I shall go to Rafe. You can go to mothers' room and rouse her. Be careful. There's a light in the hall and you'll cast a shadow if you don't keep on your hands and knees."

She drew back the bolt softly and crept out into the hall, I following her. She passed on to Rafe's room, still on her hands and knees, and I stopped at Aunt Marion's door.

Aunt Marion was a light sleeper and answered my summons almost immediately.

"What is it?" she called.

"Don't make a sound," I whispered through the keyhole; "it is I, Margaret, and there's a man outside the house ready to fire it, I think. Lal has gone to waken Rafe. Perhaps you had better come out."

She was with me in a moment, having thrown on her wrapper. On her hands and knees, behind me, she crept until we reached the lower hall, where the light was dim. There we dared to regain our feet and I told her quickly

what Lal's plan was. As I talked, Rafe in his socks and with his coat on over his nightgown, followed by Lal and Mr. Chamberlain, our guest, came down the upper stairs.

We held a hurried consultation with royal disregard for the grand undress uniforms we displayed.

"I shall kill him if I get one good bead on him," said Rafe, with his jaws set, and I saw the ugly looking revolver in his hand. "We'll put an end to these firebugs and I'll claim the thousand dollars reward."

"Go slow, Rafe," advised Mr. Chamberlain. "It may be a crazy person. If so, you don't want to fire. I'd be careful."

"It's always terrible to shed blood," said Aunt Marion, "but I think it's justifiable in this case. We've been provoked too far."

"Think of the poor things only the other night by the Bay," I said, a desire for vengeance creeping in my veins.

"Well, I'll spot the fellow first," said Rafe. "Go quietly now," to the rest of us.

We formed in silent procession and crept on all fours down the hall toward Lal's room. She was in the rear of the van, just in front of me, and she turned to whisper:

"Did you ever see such a parade? An actor might think the 'ghost was walking.' "

She suppressed a laugh as her sense of humor, highly tickled, threatened to break forth. I could hardly restrain my own laughter as I glanced along the line and saw the brave array of bare legs protruding from fluttering white night dresses.

But the seriousness of the occasion sobered me. Adelaide had been aroused by our whisperings, but had been warned in time to prevent her making any noise.

Rafe now moved easily into Lal's room to peer from one side of her window shade. His dark coat kept him from being seen by the fellow below. The rest of us took turns in looking out of the other window.

"The man's a maniac, pure and simple," announced Mr.

Chamberlain as he looked over our heads; "see how he exposes himself to view."

As he spoke the fellow had stepped out into the moonlight to light a cigarette. We could not see his face, for he wore a long light overcoat with the collar turned up. The slouch hat he wore was pulled down over his brow.

"He's the coolest firebug I ever saw," said Lal.

"He must be going to use that cigarette to fire the house," Adelaide commented brilliantly.

"Be quiet, will you?" commanded Rafe. "He'll get wind he's watched in a minute or two and sneak. I'm hanged if I know whether to fire or not."

"If we only had a telegraphic communication we could get some one here and there would be no blood shed," said Aunt Marion. "That was one of the Colonel's mistakes—in not having one put in when I suggested it."

"By George! that's cool," came from Rafe where he was watching.

"What is it?" we all whispered.

"Why—why, he's contemplating something. What the devil can it be?"

Rafe moved closer to the window.

We looked out and held our breaths in excited suspense.

The man had removed his coat and laid it across the clothes line. His figure looked boyish in the moonlight. He retained his hat. He looked up at the window—Lal's window always. He seemed to be measuring the distance. Our excitement grew more and more tense.

"If I could only see his face," murmured Lal, as she moved uneasily from us and stood by Rafe.

"Look out!" said her brother; "he's going to climb the water drain. He's no maniac. He's a burglar. Well, I won't give him a chance to say his prayers."

It seemed true what Rafe said.

He turned a moment to say to Lal roughly:

"This is no scrape of yours, is it? Any lover? You've got no affair on hand, have you?"

"You devil!" I whispered, "to even think of such a thing!"

I would have drawn Lal away, but she wouldn't move. She refused to even show she had been insulted by the words.

"He's coming! He's coming!" whispered Adelaide.

The man advanced toward the house until he stood under the window.

"I wouldn't shoot, Rafe," said Mrs. North from the other window; "or, if you must—"

"Hit him in the arm or leg," said Mr. Chamberlain.

"A man can't choose in this light. But he deserves to die—the scamp!"

We felt the water-pipe creak and knew the poor wretch had begun his climb toward death.

"Hold your ears," said Rafe under his breath and I saw him pull the trigger.

The shot rang out clear on the night air. Every one of us paled under the sound. We heard a noise as of the big water-pipe giving way under a lurching body. A cry like that of a lost soul penetrated the stillness and framed a word. Was I dreaming? The word was "LAL!" cleaving the air clear as the notes of a dying swan. There was a sound as of a falling body and all was quiet. Barely an instant of terrified stillness when our stunned senses realized the truth.

"My God! My God! It's Roy! It's Roy!" shrieked Lal, and threw up her arms.

Paralysis could not have made us more immovable. We stood there as if turned to stone. Everyone seemed incapable of the slightest movement—all but Mr. Chamberlain. He dashed out of the room and down the stairs. The still smoking revolver had dropped from Rafe's hand and he was on his knees on the floor sobbing like a woman. Adelaide and Aunt Marion were clinging together like a couple of terrified children. Lal turned her glassy eyes on me.

"ROY!" she screamed with all her strength. "It was Roy. Do you hear? It was Roy he killed. Roy!"

Then I fled from the room and was out in the grass, never heeding the stubble that cut my feet and left them bleeding afterwards.

Around at the side of the house Mr. Chamberlain was bending over the huddled figure of a man on the ground.

"It is Roy," he said as I came up; "but he is not dead yet. Good God! but he can't live. What kind of a bullet was that? Oh! the hole that it's torn. There!—don't look!"

He had removed the boy's coat and tearing open the shirt, tried to hold the wound together with the pressure of his hands. Great clots of blood were spouting out of the frightful place.

"Oh, Roy, Roy," I sobbed, as I bent over him; "why, why have you done this?"

"Here, help me in with him. Or, no—yes, it's better so."

He lifted the slight figure up and together we got him in on the sitting-room lounge, where Mr. Chamberlain turned on the light.

"I'll run for a doctor, though I'm afraid it's no use," he said, catching up an afghan and wrapping it around him. "Hold that wound together this way."

He showed me and tore off.

Then I heard footsteps behind me and Lal was reeling forward to clasp her brother in her arms. Behind her were the others.

It was more than I could bear to see the agony in Lal's eyes as she hung over her brother, she beat off anyone who dared touch him like an insane person. It was pitiful to see her take his head in her hands and cover his face with kisses. May I be ever spared such another sight.

"Roy—Roy," she cried with heartbreaking misery in her voice; "for God's sake speak to me. You are not dying, dear Roy. Tell me you are not dying."

If a loved one's voice has power over the locked senses *Lal's had in this* instance.

Roy opened his eyes and his glance fell first upon his sister. He smiled.

"Lal!" he whispered. He tried to speak, but we could only see the moving of his lips

Rafe sprang forward.

"O, forgive me, forgive me, Roy," he implored, sinking on his knees; "I couldn't know it was you. We thought—"

He broke down and wept bitterly.

"Mother," said Roy with an effort, and though we all heard him, I saw what it cost him.

Mrs. North went forward and a second smile lightened the young face.

"I wanted—to see Lal," he said in a whisper. "I was—passing through—with our company and—came down—here. I knew," he paused for strength to continue, "I knew you wouldn't—wouldn't let me—in, so—so I tried to—wake Lallie—without letting the others—know. But—I guess—she didn't—understand. There was—some—mistake—"

Then the blood came in great gushes out of his mouth, his head fell back and I knew he was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

Roy was buried in the family plot in Fairlawn Cemetery.

There had been a coroner's inquest and curiosity had run high in Nineveh. People filled the park, eager to know the details. We felt the intrusion very keenly, but Rafe was exonerated from all blame and I think this relieved Aunt Marion from much of her distraction.

Rafe was prostrated, and Aunt Marion and Adelaide spent all their time with him. It was Lal and I who prepared the young body for its burial. She would not suffer the undertaker to do a thing more than was necessary. When he took the measurements for the coffin she watched

it all, standing by her dead brother with her hand upon his hair, waiting for the man to leave the room.

I was glad to see she bore up so under the crushing blow. We had gone through Roy's few personal effects—what he had about him—together. But very little rewarded our search. We found a typewritten manuscript in his coat. It was the part of Beane in Gillette's war drama, "Held by the Enemy." Passages were underscored and notes had been made on the margins. Lal looked at it tenderly.

"He was more than a 'mummer,'" she said; "these side notes show he studied intelligently. He would have risen in the profession. Oh, why is it he was taken? Is there any meaning in these terrible things that happen to people, Peggy?"

"There must be, dear. Though often we make the mistake of ascribing to God many calamities with which I am sure He has nothing whatever to do. You know we are free agents, and our own power over events is not a small thing."

"Roy's death was foreordained. I am sure of that. He walked right into it and no one to warn him. Oh! my God, why, why?"

She threw her arms over the quiet figure on the bed and kissed the face so cold in death.

I let her expend her despair. It was the only thing to do. I knew that when she herself turned to me for comfort it would be then that I could soothe. Until then I could only watch with silent suffering for her bitter passage through this agony.

A little picture of Lal, taken some years before, we found in an inner pocket. It was wrapped carefully in tissue paper. Held together with it by a blue ribbon were a few papers. One was a receipted bill for a supper where wine had largely figured; there was a note in a woman's handwriting mentioning an engagement for dinner at a well-known Bohemian resort in New York. It was couched in endearing terms and seemed to be a case of genuine affection.

There was another letter written upon a sheet of paper which had evidently been hurriedly torn from a notebook. I wished I had been able to secure it before the contents met Lal's eyes, but this was impossible. She read it and I saw her face grow white and her whole body shrink. She handed it to me without a word. It was dated five months back. I read:

My Dear Boy—

Marchand tells me you were drinking heavily again last night. For God's sake, young one, why do you take the fleetest horse you can to the devil? If you must go, can't you make the journey less rapidly? When you left us I knew I couldn't watch you as I had done. Make another effort. Brace up and be a man. If not for your own sake, for the sake of the little sister of whom you have told me. From

You Know Whom.

No other signature save this, but it needed no name to tell us that it had been written by some devil-may-care fellow who had sought to check in Roy the beginning of what had perhaps been his undoing.

"Roy's death has been his salvation, Lal," I said, as with bowed head she retied the little packet. "We know a comforting thing, dear. He had made one friend at least away from his home who took an honest interest in him and tried to set him right and keep him so. Only a kind man, a generous man, could have written a note like that."

I saw her slip the package in her dress. I knew she would prize it in the future because it had belonged to Roy.

After the funeral, which was private, Howell came to take me away. He had secured a room in a lodging-house in the village at a very reasonable rate. He came boldly to the front door and asked for me. But he would not step in the house. Instead, he sat down in one of the hammocks on the veranda.

Lal went down with me to the piazza.

"She is all I have now," she said to Howell, looking at

me with the pathetic air that was a part of her, "and you are taking her away."

"Oh, well, now, it isn't going to be as bad as you're trying to make out," said Howell, visibly embarrassed. "Wait just a few months. Peggy and I will have enough money to rent, if we cannot buy, a little shanty of our own. Then you shall come and live with us. How's that, Titian Queen?"

"In the meantime the prospect doesn't allay the wretchedness of Peggy's absence. Oh, this house is terrible without her, and now that Roy is gone—"

She choked up and I turned away.

"I can't bear it," she said excitedly, turning to me with both arms outstretched. "Oh, Peggy, Peggy, I cannot bear it."

I felt utterly helpless with her in this mood. But Howell was looking distressed and uncomfortable. I put my arms around her.

"Come over with us now, Lal," I said. "You can go back in the evening. Each day can be passed this way. What is to prevent? Things will be much more bearable then."

She shook her head.

"No, I'm not fit for anyone's company. I'm not going to inflict myself on you to-day. And I've just been robbing Howell. He hasn't seen anything of you."

She kissed me and then to my surprise turned to Howell with something like reflection in her face.

"You're a good fellow," she said. "I think you have the best nature of anyone I ever knew. I've never paid much attention to you, but you're true and you're going to be good to Peggy. She can never be unhappy while she has you, can she?"

"Why—no. I s'pose not—I hope not," he replied; and I took a malicious delight in seeing the red blood surge under the deep tan of his skin.

"You'll always be kind to her," pursued Lal, as if voicing

inward musings; "you couldn't be anything else. And she'll love you with so much of her heart that others will get but a mere bit. I envy you both—I do."

"No one can take your place, Lal," I hastened to say, worried by the morbid strain creeping into her voice. "You and Howell have each half of my heart. Only—the love is different—naturally."

Aunt Marion's imperative voice came from the hall above, cutting the air with a rasping vehemence. I saw Lal wince from the tones. An unpleasant voice jarred upon her more than would have been deemed possible. Her own sweet tones irritated her mother beyond endurance at times; possibly because the contrast was so glaring.

"Laura! Laura!" called Mrs. North; "come here immediately; I want you."

"It is good-bye now, dear Peggy," said Lal, looking at me with mournful intensity.

She kissed me more than once, nodded to Howell and went swiftly into the house.

Our walk from the park was quiet enough, for I felt little like talking. But when we reached the village near the county jail we saw that some commotion was afoot. A great crowd had collected and angry looking men were surging around the rickety building that did duty for a place in which to lodge suspected miscreants. I heard dark threats uttered from more than one masculine throat. A few of the fishwives had come over from the Bay and they joined in the clamor about the jail.

"What is it, Howell? What is it?" I asked, taking tight hold of his arm as we pushed our way through the crowd.

"I guess they have apprehended the firebug. There's Kit Murray. I'll ask him."

But a man at our elbow had heard us talking.

"Aye, it's the firebug," he volunteered. "Nick Marston, the hell-devil. They've caught him at last. Found him over at Bridger's this mornin' soakin' some rags with kerosene. He broke down an' confessed all. He fired every fire we had in Nineveh."

"Nick Marston!" I exclaimed. "Oh! how awful!"

"Oh! cigarettes have done it. They can't hold the poor devil responsible," said Howell.

"You're fur lettin' him off?" queried our companion, peering up at Howell out of his little squint eyes; "you—why, you lost by his work. He set fire to the Bay lodgin's, thinkin' you an' your wife wuz there. He said he owed you more'n one. That's why he burned that place. Crazy? He knows what he's about. He's got a wholesale grudge 'gainst folks an' is tryin' to wipe it out. That's what he wuz doin'."

He spat on the ground with calm disregard of his neighbors and moved away.

"There's the sheriff, thank heaven!" exclaimed Howell, as a big man with a posse at his back went through the crowd, using his cane to good effect. Then he made a short speech to the murmuring rabble, in which he said law and order would be maintained to the letter and he "wuz there to enforce it on them as didn't have no regard for the government. The prisoner would hev the chance of a fair trial, or he'd know the reason why."

Howell and I moved away.

I couldn't help feeling glad afterwards that he was to be given a chance. The trial came off many days later. A plea of insanity was made for the defense, and it all ended in Marston's being incarcerated in the county insane asylum.

But this was after the last blow that came with terrific force, bearing me to the very earth by its magnitude.

It was the day after Marston's apprehension and Nineveh was still quivering with the succession of startling events that had visited the little place. The whole town was shaken to its very foundations by the sensational circumstances that had suddenly brought it into prominence. One could not enter the village without hearing from all sides new versions of the last excitement.

Just before the noon hour I put on my hat and started out for the park, intending to take Lal back with me for

luncheon. I had left her the morning before fretting through the day that she was not with me. But I knew Aunt Marion could find plenty for her to do, and if Lal did not spend a small part of her day in her own home I knew there would be another outbreak when her mother would unreasonably demand an explanation as to how she spent her time when she did see me.

I didn't like to go in unannounced when I reached the house. I had outgrown entirely, in so brief a time, the feeling that it was my home. It had never been the same since Uncle Donald's death. Now it had a chill look about it.

So I touched the bell and Lydia answered the summons. I smiled as she opened the screen door.

"Miss Lal?" I said. "Is she in her room or out on the lake?"

"Why, hasn't she been with you?" Lydia asked, a look of great surprise entering her old eyes.

"With me. Certainly not. I left her here yesterday morning. Why, what—"

Aunt Marion was passing down the stairs on her way through to the rear of the house. When she saw me she stopped.

"Where is Laura?" she asked.

"That's what I'm asking Lydia. Is she not here?"

I felt myself changing to a block of ice in temperature.

"Why—why," said Aunt Marion, setting down the pitcher she held with something like fear in her face. "She has not been here since yesterday morning. She left the house at 11 to go to the village for me and—"

"And she has not been home since?" I gasped.

"I didn't expect her. It was a small errand she had to do for me. She said she might see you and that if she wasn't home in the evening I'd know she was housed. She—"

"Oh! fools! fools!" I screamed. "And you let her go! She hasn't been near me—do you hear—not near me at all. I haven't seen her since yesterday morning. Do you know that? Where do you suppose she is now? Oh, God! Why have you been so blind?"

I walked up and down the piazza, wringing my hands frantically.

Aunt Marion rushed toward me. She grasped me by the shoulder. I could see she was very frightened.

"Where is she? What do you think? You know her nature—where do you think she has gone?"

"How can I tell? Of course I know her nature—better than anyone else, but how do I know to what your unkindness has driven her? It was 11 when she left here yesterday? And she has not been here since? And she let you think she came to me? Oh, my heavens, I understand—I understand!"

"What is it? What—what do you think?"

"Have you been in her room?" I demanded abruptly, firing my questions thick and fast; "have you searched among her things? Did she leave the house empty handed?"

"I don't know—I didn't see her. Did she, Lydia?" turning to the old woman who was rocking herself to and fro, her mind seemingly overwhelmed by this fresh catastrophe.

But Lydia knew nothing.

I dashed upstairs to Lal's room, Aunt Marion at my heels. Adelaide heard our hurrying footsteps and came lazily out. She saw her mother's white face, and I suppose my own manner must have indicated I was about beside myself.

"What on earth is the matter?" she asked.

But we neither of us answered her.

I had thrown open the wardrobe and was scanning the contents. My eyes were more familiar with Lal's clothes than anyone's else. Even she, herself, did not know all of her suits. She often hung a waist at the back of the closet and then forgot she owned it. When she saw it again it was like a new gown.

Now my experienced eyes saw the empty places of two absentees. But two: a pretty plaid she was more than

ordinarily fond of, for one so oblivious to dress as she, and a quiet challie. She had evidently left wearing a black skirt with the conventional summer shirt waist, for upon further inspection I missed these.

Then I pulled open her bureau drawers and quickly saw her little stock of handkerchiefs and gloves was gone; also a few neck ribbons, a scant supply of underclothing (she had left the greater part behind) and a glance at her closet shelves told me she had taken only the hat she had worn.

Her few bits of jewelry were missing, too. I turned quickly at Aunt Marion's sharp exclamation as she set down a small iron bank in which Uncle Donald had often dropped bits of silver.

"She has taken her money with her. She has left for good," said Aunt Marion, looking at me in a stunned fashion quite unlike herself.

"She will never come back if she has opened her bank."

I picked up the empty thing and saw how it had been broken into.

"She had about fifty dollars in it. She often said she would never use it unless in dire emergency."

"Hasn't she left any note—any explanation?" asked Adelaide.

"Not a line—or it would be in plain sight," said her mother, going from dresser to table, from bureau to stand; "what are we to do? Is the girl crazy? She has always been so much trouble, ever since she was a baby—so much worry and care."

"You know why," I said coldly, looking at her; "when a flower struggles along without the proper nourishment and care, and then suddenly dies, are you surprised? The simile is obvious. Lal has left you simply because she couldn't stand it any longer. Your coldness, your constant quarrels with her, your continual upbraidings have had their effect. You have driven her from the house. She will never enter it again. You have sent her out to face the world alone. Her blood is on your head. Not yours alone,

either. You," and I looked at Adelaide, "have helped to do this. In future she will not annoy you by merely being around. And if you leave any means unused in tracing her God will punish you by holding you responsible for her death."

"How dare you charge me with such things?" Aunt Marion demanded, approaching me; "I have always believed your influence has done much in making her rebel against my authority. You may leave this house now and forever. I am tired of the plastered goodness of your face. You will have no excuse to come, now that this willful girl has taken matters into her own hands and left home."

"She has probably had to leave," here interposed Adelaide, with such innuendo in her tones that her mother turned abruptly from me to her.

I felt myself freeze in an instant.

"What do you mean?" I demanded, and I felt my whole attitude to be one of menace; "what do you insinuate?"

Adelaide drew back a little, but she was not one to relinquish a point once made. She said:

"She was not looking at all well lately. She hasn't been for some time. Her spirits were dull, too. How do we know but what she had a lover of whom we knew—"

"Oh! for shame! For shame! Oh! the baseness of your thoughts. To believe such a thing of your own sister," I cried in angry scorn.

Aunt Marion's face had clouded. She looked from Adelaide to me doubtfully.

"She has no regard for appearances. And her ideas of honor were vague. She—"

"This is too much," I said hotly, with repressed fury in my voice; "Oh! that you, of all people, should be the first to breath suspicion against her. Honor!" I turned passionately upon Aunt Marion; "how dare you use the word? I have heard you storm at Lal for some mischievous prank, lugging in that word honor when it had no relevancy to *what* she had done, and the next moment I have caught you

listening at the tubes and reading letters not your own. That was what you did—prated to Lal until she was sick and tired, of honor, respect and duty, never reflecting that you lacked those things yourself, that you had no right to preach those things you never once put into practice yourself. Honor! Lal has more in her little finger than you ever dreamed of. I am going now. I never expect to see you again in this world. I hope to God I never may."

With which bitter words I had gone from them, walking swiftly along the lake path, a thousand thoughts running through my brain, my heart thumping madly, my lips dry from excitement, my hands cold with terror—terror for Lal, gone twenty-four hours before anyone knew of her rash venture—terror lest she should suffer disaster or illness.

I was stupefied, blinded by the news, and rushed along thinking incoherently, unable to frame any definite plan. Then to my intense relief my dizzy eyes saw Howell crossing the main street to enter a hardware store. I stumbled after him.

"Oh, Howell—Howell," I cried, as he turned with a smile when he espied me, "Lal has gone! What are we to do?"

"Gone? Gone where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere for good, though, I am sure. Since yesterday morning. She has taken matters into her own hand."

He led me to an open lot a little way beyond the main street, and sitting down on a great round stone I told him all I knew, concluding with my recent interview with Aunt Marion. He looked grave as I finished.

"If they succeed in locating her they'll probably never let you know," he said, "and I—my poor Peggy, I have no money to search for her for you."

"I know, dear, but can't we move to the city? Can't you get a position there? If it was barely enough to keep us alive it would be something, for I could tramp the streets looking for her. And I'd find her, I know. She has gone

to the city I am sure. She has struck out for herself. Oh, Howell, think of her alone in that great place without a friend! Whatever will become of her? She is as helpless as a little child in so many ways. She can't do anything for herself. She isn't strong. Oh! she will fall sick, she will work till she dies before she would return. Oh, I know her. We shall never see her again—never—unless we search for her and never give up searching."

"We haven't a clew, Peggy. Did she leave no word—not even a note to you?"

"Not at the house; but surely I will hear from her. She couldn't be so cruel as to go away without leaving some word for me. Perhaps—have you gotten the mail at the postoffice this morning?"

"No. Do you think there might be something? I've been out on the Bay. Just got back. Come, we'll go see."

We hurried to the postoffice.

In Howell's box there was nothing and nothing in Aunt Marion's.

The assistant, a young girl new in the place, as well as a stranger in Nineveh, looked at me keenly as I made an exclamation upon finding the boxes empty.

"You are Mrs. Hope?" she asked.

"Yes—have you anything for me that you have not put in the box?"

"Yes. But I was not to give it to you till this evening. A young lady came in about 11:15 yesterday and asked me to hold a letter for her to Mrs. Howell Hope until to-night. It was a little irregular, but she was so sweet about it and seemed so anxious that I promised."

"Give it to me now, please. Let me have it. It is important," I said quickly.

A little reluctantly she passed it out. I seized it and in the street tore it open with nervous fingers. This is what I read aloud with choking voice while Howell held my arm to *steady me:*

PEGGY, MY DEAR ONE:

You will not think hardly of me for going away, for you know all that I have suffered. I have cut loose from everything and mean to begin for myself. It will be useless for you to attempt to find me, for I shall conceal my movements so that you shall never know until I am ready. Why do I do this? Because I must make my own way and win my success before you can see me again. I shall have earned independence in some line by then. I don't know exactly what I shall do, but it shall be something great and famous. Think of it, dear. Your Lal with an honored name, happy in her self-support. It will not be for long, for I shall work hard in whatever path I choose and win my spurs with the goal of Peggy's approval ahead of me. You'll pat me on the back then, won't you, dear?

You must not worry about me. I shall begin to take such excellent care of myself that I will be a pyramid of health, as well as happiness, when you next see me. Dear Peggy, with father and Roy gone, you were the only one left me. Then Howell came in for part proprietorship, and I realized it was time for me to go. Mind, I don't blame him at all. We are each of us looking ahead for our life's happiness and he was right to take his. Although we may be separated for months, possibly years, I shall remember, and you will not forget, but look forward to again seeing

Your ever loving

LAL.

By the time I had finished reading I could no longer see the paper.

"Take me home," I cried; "Oh, take me home. This is more than I can bear."

Together we reached our rooms and Howell laid me gently on the bed and took the hairpins out of my hair and sat by my side with my hand in his, his pleasant voice rising and falling with a quieting effect as he talked to me. He stayed by me all day, but by nightfall I was a sick woman, though I refused to see a doctor. I grew worse, and I remember seeing the doctor and my husband constantly in the room.

Then there came a long blank period when my brain seemed to be tortured with a thousand horrible fancies—at

one time seeing my poor Lal in the clutches of a grinning death's head; another time imagining her sick unto death, calling for me in her pathetic voice, and I, tied by iron chains, unable to go to her.

In my delirium I chased a hundred vague illusions thinking them Lal, only to have them turn and leer in my face as my struggling hands just lost them. Once it was Adelaide I was following over hill and dale thinking she was Lal. Again it was Nick Marston with a flaming torch in his hand beckoning me to follow. Still another time it was the resolute face of the actor who had passed now almost out of my thoughts.

When I awoke to reason I knew I had been very ill. But it was a shock to have Howell tell me it had been nine weeks that I had been laid low with brain fever. And through it all he had nursed me himself, his thin face betraying his night vigils, his unremitting care.

As I grew stronger he told me gradually every bit of news. He had been able to learn nothing of the movements of Aunt Marion and Rafe in regard to Lal, save through what he could glean from John. It was little enough. An effort had been made to find her, detectives in New York had been put upon the case, but with no result.

Adelaide had married Morton Cole one evening quietly at home, with only her mother and Rafe present. They had gone to live in the handsome house at Bay Beach which Morton Cole's father had given them. A week later Rafe and his mother left the homestead and went to board at a hotel in Bay Beach. The house in the Park passed into the hands of the mortgage holders.

Day after day I waited desperately, despairingly; hoping for a second letter from Lal. If only a line, how gratefully I would have welcomed it. I waited hoping, longing, praying.

But it never came.

END OF BOOK I

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

It may seem strange and inexplicable to many that I learned so much of Lal's life after she had left home. Perhaps some will question as to how I knew her thoughts and feelings, her moments of sadness and happiness, all the minor incidents that went towards making her life. She could not have told me all herself. There must have been much that she would have forgotten or cast aside as trivial.

But the secret of her inner thoughts I learned from her journal and her impression books. Not alone did she keep an account of the events great and little that befell her, but she recorded whole conversations she had with people, particularly those who figured most conspicuously in her life.

She analyzed her feelings exactly as she was moved, and described her haps and mishaps with the accuracy of a professional writer. Even the most sacred epochs of her life she laid bare in her diaries.

Oh, traversed pages, what do you not breathe between the written lines? What do I not see in the dear handwriting, the smooch here, the turned down page there? The life blood of that rare soul who was dearer to me than aught else.

She gave these diaries to me, and I have them before me now as I write. I have copied almost literally from her writings, only changing the tenses, touching here or there to round out a point or color an ambiguous sentence.

Interwoven with her own personal account is much I learned from Mr. White, whose interest in her was so kindly. He told me little things he had noted about her and several facts I could have learned from no other but him.

So from these notes before me I have written the remain-

ing chapters of her life, telling it as I have tried to tell it from the beginning, "with malice toward none."

If there is a disjointedness noticeable between two certain chapters, it is because I have continued in a personal vein after having apparently written in the third person of the weeks when I was not with Lal. After I found her, for I did find her—after God knows how much weary searching—I have taken up the thread of my record in much the same strain as before.

CHAPTER II

It was the latter part of August that Lal left home.

The dog days had spent themselves, though it was yet far from cool in the city. There is always activity in New York, no matter what the season, and Lal's eyes were new enough to the metropolis' bustling rush to be thoroughly interested in everything around her.

Her nature was one that cast care aside so quickly that when she was transferred to fresh scenes she was a very little while in recovering her natural buoyancy. Her spirits rose when she had left Nineveh well behind her, and as soon as her foot touched the pavement of the great city she felt the inspiring sense of life and work ahead of her. Everything assumed its brightest hue. Lal wore rose colored spectacles habitually; hence it took much to discourage her. The very clang of the cable cars filled her with a feeling of vim and happiness.

To elude the detectives she felt would possibly be detailed to search for her, she did a clever thing. She answered immediately in person an advertisement for boarders in an extremely fashionable quarter of the city. She knew that, there, her money would not last her any length of time,

but she trusted to chance and her own perseverance to secure her a position above the ordinary.

It was here her youth, her unsophisticatedness, were evidenced. But she reasoned that her pursuers knowing the extent of her money resources would naturally spend valuable time in searching for her among the poorer parts of the city.

She hardly knew yet, herself, what she wanted, except that it must be work of some kind. But she had a vague notion of being able in a little while to bury herself in a Western city, thinking the farther away she got from Nineveh the safer she was.

Her well-bred air, her extreme refinement, her winning personality won her admission to the handsome neighborhood she sought. By one of those rare pieces of good luck, pure chance as it was, she was given a room, though she frankly admitted she had no other luggage than the dressing case she carried.

The owner of the house, a gentlewoman who read human nature from the face, and who, happily, could claim she had never been deceived thereby, waived all the unusual demands of the case.

Lal, attracted by the kindliness of the calm face, with one of her impulsive movements held out her watch and three valuable rings she possessed.

"Take these for security, won't you?" she said; "it is so kind of you to accept me without question. It doesn't sound like a New York method of transacting business."

The lady laughed in the mellow tone that betrayed her nature.

"My dear, I have never yet been deceived in a face. Yours speaks for itself. Keep your rings. You may need them some time, though I hope not."

Won by the simple sweetness of her manner, Lal told her everything of her life, the terrible events of the past few months, the unhappy circumstances of her home surroundings. Her listener showed the keenest attention. Lal,

noting the interest displayed in the old face, exclaimed suddenly:

"You will not betray me? You will not write my people."

"Betray you, child? Certainly not. You have done right. I had a sister who was as unhappy at home as you. She left us and began her struggle alone and unassisted. And to-day she—"

"What did she rise to?" was the eager question.

"First tell me what you propose to do."

"I don't know quite yet. But I shall go out to-morrow and look for something. I shall try the papers first."

Her companion smiled.

"May you be as successful as was my sister. She is co-editor of *Woman's Interest* to-day."

"Here?"

"Oh, no. Out West. I wish I could do something for you. But after all I think it would be better if you fight your own way."

She looked at the young face before her with the closest scrutiny.

"You have the talisman of a pure mind," she said presently, "and you are optimistic. These two things are the freshets of all youth's glories. They are like the fragrance of grapes plucked in the early morning with the dew still clinging. Don't let these go and you will be rich."

The following morning Lal set out in pursuit of work. She had no clearly defined plan and her tremendous independence would not permit of her asking advice as to first movements. Her friends nodded to her from the window as she ran lightly down the steps. The kindly nod cheered Lal to the verge of buoyancy.

She pulled down her veil and walked along at her rapid gait, her heart warm with the glowing thought of coming independence through some work she loved. Her springing step made a few jaded faces beam a moment at the very refreshment of the sight, and when she jumped lightly on a

cable car the conductor, brightened by her face, had not the heart to utter some severe words of reproof as he should have done, for her reckless manner.

Fascinating stories had Lal read of enterprising girls bearding surly editors in their dens to gain a place on the staff of a great city paper. Reading these stories as she had in some of the daily papers she had no doubt as to their veracity. Her own attempts at writing had resulted in the favorable comment of her friends upon reading her articles, political, culinary and otherwise in the Nineveh *Leader*. She wished now that she had some copies of the *Leader*—editors were such suspicious people. But she would be frank and perfectly unflattering of herself. Perhaps then he would treat her kindly.

Toward Park Row she bent her steps upon leaving the car. Her heart was in her throat as she ascended the stairs leading to the offices of one of the most prominent of New York's papers. Not a woman did she see. Only men rushing in and out, jostling her rudely sometimes in their endless hurry. Somewhat confused by what seemed a labyrinth of doors and passages, she paused a moment. Reflecting instantly that this would never do if she meant to make headway, she addressed a man who seemed slightly less hurried than the others around her.

"Can you tell me where I may find the editor?" she asked, looking at him; "the editor of this paper?"

The man stared. But he recovered himself in a moment. Lal's eyes were too clear to admit of dallying for a moment.

"The editor," he replied, lifting his hat, "is in Europe. He has been there for three months now. But the city editor, do you—"

"Yes, yes; the city editor," she said quickly.

"Through that little hall, third room to the left," and with a bow and a look that was not wholly due to her display of ignorance, he passed on.

Then Lal remembered she knew not the name of anyone employed upon the paper.

But she went boldly to the room whither she had been directed only to be confronted by a boy who, upon hearing her question, curtly demanded her card.

"But I have come off without any. Can't I see him without a card?" exclaimed Lal, deploring her madness in leaving behind in Nineveh such an essential thing as her card.

The boy smiled superiorly.

"No one is admitted without a card," he deigned to reply, and returned to the unhealthy looking book he was reading.

Lal threaded her way out of the building.

"They can't all be so particular," was her reflection; "surely a card isn't demanded in every place."

Certain that such a rule could not extend everywhere in the domain of letters, undaunted, she turned quickly into another of the big buildings, precipitating herself into the arms of a portly gentleman, who apologized most profusely and smiled blandly upon her hurried, "Beg pardon."

Affairs were certainly carried on quite differently in this place. No small boy obtrusively bobbed up to take her name. No one seemed to be lying in wait to deny her admittance. She read "City Editor" over the door of a rather unattractive looking room and walked in.

The only occupant was a man. He was writing rapidly at the big desk near the window, a nervous twitching of the lips keeping time to the scratch of his pen. If he had heard the sound of anyone entering he never betrayed it by a sign. He continued writing.

Lal stood waiting. Presently she resorted to the old artifice. She cleared her throat and moved a little. But nothing repaid her. Realizing that her time was as important to her as the city editor's was to him, she approached and stood by the desk.

"I beg your pardon," she said.

Still the pen scratched away, but an unpropitious "Well?" assailed her ears. It came from the twitching lips *though they* were very near the paper.

"I wished to speak to you," said Lal in the voice that always arrested attention. But evidently the editor was oblivious to any music save what was running in his own soul, as he continued his writing, for he did not look up as he replied:

"What is it that you want?"

Not surprised at the cavalier treatment, but chafing at delay, Lal made a bold answer.

"I certainly cannot tell you if you can give me no more attention than this."

She was quite properly alarmed at her own temerity when she had spoken, but she was not one to show fear, though she often felt it. She had no doubt of the result. She felt sure she was to be speedily shown the door for her audacity, for—

The city editor threw down his pen and moved his chair back from the desk. His was a face much lined with care, but it was far from being an unkindly one.

"It is important business, I suppose—to you?" he said; "well, let's have it. My article, it seems, must wait for a lady. Take a chair. You haven't come to me for a position, I hope?" with a most unpromising glance.

"That's just what I have come for," replied Lal, desperately; "oh, can't you help me? I need it so much and—and —I would work so hard to suit you. You would not find me a novice exactly. I would fill the place I know. You would not regret the venture."

"But my dear young lady, we don't gamble in places like these. We have to be sure of our material, sure of those who supply it. We—"

"But there has to be a beginning for everyone," interrupted Lal; "I thought the American press encouraged young talent."

"They do; but hardly at the expense of their own success. Do you realize that newspaper work is not a recreation? It's an art, like everything is that is done well. How have you had experience? You said you were not a novice, I believe."

"Experience?" repeated Lal, fencing.

"Yes. Have you written anything?"

"Oh, yes. A number of articles."

"The subjects?"

"Society, politics, smoking and—cake recipes."

The editor courteously hid a smile in the twitching of his lips.

"These were printed?" he queried.

"Oh, yes; they came out," Lal hastened to assure him.

"Where? In what paper?"

"Oh, not in a city paper. In a—"

"Some village weekly? I understand. There is a vast deal of difference between a city and a country newspaper, you must realize."

"Yes," said Lal meekly, beginning to feel her deficiencies.

The editor leaned forward in his chair.

"My young friend," he said, "I wish I could do something for you. You have the freshness of enthusiasm shining in your face, and you look like a young woman of culture. But we never take beginners. Once in a great while we employ at the lowest possible figure some young man or woman who has served apprenticeship many years on some out-of-town or Western paper. Then in that case they are no longer young. Are you sure this is your vocation? And, pardon me, but are you forced to do it? You are well dressed. Is it just a feeling of independence?"

"Indeed, no—that is, of course, it is independence, but I've got to work for my living. You can do nothing for me?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry—"

Lal rose.

"You have been very kind. I am much obliged. I beg your pardon for my intrusion. I shall try elsewhere."

And with a deep inclination of the head she left the office.

"Whither now?" was her mental query as she paused a moment in front of the building; "most girls, I suppose, would have sense enough to accept that man's words as final. But I won't give up. I shall interview every one of the band, even if it takes in the entire staff of every newspaper in the city."

Another monster building loomed up near her.

"It certainly must hold some place for me," she said to herself; "well—that is a thing that must be ascertained."

Again she made her way through devious passages to the dread sanctum of the editorial personage. No card was demanded, but she was kept waiting a good half hour before the boy appeared to conduct her to her goal.

A worried, abstracted looking man gave her a barely civil word as she entered. Lal began to wonder if editors had the weight of the universe upon their shoulders. The expression of their faces suggested it.

"I asked to see you because I—I wanted a place," said Lal, plunging at once into her subject, though appalled by the attitude of the man.

"We are cutting down salaries, discharging people and having a hard time doing it," was the brief, though not uncivil reply; "no place for you; I'm sorry."

He turned to his desk again, and Lal, profoundly taken aback, got quickly out of the room.

Not disheartened, but with a good bit of her high enthusiasm quelled, Lal stood on the curbing revolving her next movement.

"I have not exhausted the newspaper resources yet," she said firmly, speaking out loud, as she sometimes did; "I shall try it again."

And another attempt she did make and a fifth and a sixth.

Scant courtesy was shown her at some places, suave politeness at others. Still another phase—kindly firmness—

was evinced by one or two editors. But in all cases she met with rebuff.

It was 2 o'clock before Lal, somewhat subdued, realized she needed something more than her nerves to keep her on her feet. She spent some valuable time in looking for a restaurant that was not too imposing a looking place for the means of her pocketbook. After three-quarters of an hour's search she found one on a side street which looked about right to her, and went bravely in, notwithstanding the unusually large element of the masculine gender scattered about at the tables. But she took heart upon seeing a dried-up looking woman eating monotonously in one corner, and seated herself near her, feeling a sort of protection thereby.

While she ate her simple luncheon she reflected.

"It's quite plain I am debarred newspaper offices for a while at any rate," she said to herself, "but I suppose I can work up to them. In the meantime I must live, and to live I must work. And I can't spend all my time chasing intangible things. I think about the best thing to do would be to look through the advertisements."

She bought an early edition of a paper and looked carefully through the advertising columns. Advertisement after advertisement appeared for cook, waitress and laundress. The servant problem is a vexatious one to New Yorkers.

"I could cook or wait on table," thought Lal as she scanned the lines, "but this as a last resort. These are for unemployed hands. I must find something to keep my mind busy."

If there had been an advertisement for governess I think she would have seized upon that, never reflecting how small her love of children was. There was none, however, but tucked away almost out of sight in a corner her eager eyes saw:

WANTED—A music teacher for two young girls. Must be thorough. Small salary at the beginning. Call between 6 and 7 this evening at — West Forty-Fifth Street.

"If the salary is so small a finished pianist will not be expected," mused Lal; "I'll make the trial for this until I can do better. I know enough of music to teach."

She returned to her boarding place to freshen herself a little from the day's fatigue. She nodded cheerfully at Mrs. Van Dyne on her way out again.

"Nothing yet," she answered in response to the inquiry, "but things look bright."

When she was shown into the parlor at West Forty-Fifth Street it was something of a dash upon her light spirits to find fifteen other applicants ahead of her. It was but a few minutes past 6. Well dressed, respectable, and in many instances refined appearing girls they were, sitting quietly, but vigilantly awaiting their turn with the mistress of the house, who, behind the closed door in the next room, saw each one, passing upon the merits of each as individually they played some selection upon the piano.

It was a weary wait, and the clock had chimed 7 when Lal's turn came. She responded with what one would scarcely call alacrity, feeling confident the place was already taken.

She was critically surveyed by the business-like woman who motioned her to a seat.

"You can see I've had a heap of people coming in answer to my 'ad,'" she said immediately, "and there isn't much chance for you. Still you can try if you have a mind to. There's two that suits me mighty well now. I've got their addresses. You can play for me now so I can see what kind of a player you are. If you're any good I'll take your name and compare you with the others."

Inwardly rebelling at the lack of all fine feeling in the woman, Lal sat down at the piano. At any other time her emotions would have got the better of her and the woman have been treated to a cold stare and a few chilly words to mark Lal's departure. But she realized she was dependent upon the world for a living, and that now had arrived the period where her feelings must take second place.

It was an old instrument, but Lal's fingers touched the keys no less lovingly. She played a simple thing, *Crescendo*, by Lohr, but a piece into which much expression could be put. It was full of melody, and one of her favorites. When she had finished she waited with her hands in her lap for some comment.

But the woman made an impatient movement with her foot.

"That's a namby-pamby sort of a thing. Haven't you got something lively—something that makes a great show? I want my daughters to capture with their music. That thing's no good."

Lal checked a sharp reply but her face was set as she turned on the piano stool.

"Perhaps your taste is educated to this style," she could not resist saying, though her tones were perfectly even.

She dashed into a medley of variations of popular street songs, thundering out the bass notes with good effect though in a trashy style she never used unless in a mood for guying.

It was her undoing.

Her listener rose before she was finished.

"I don't like that," she said, "I'm afraid you won't do at all. The servant will show you the way out."

She turned away and Lal found herself upon the pavement in a frame of mind quite new to her. To be so unceremoniously dismissed by a woman of no finer caliber than that! And for what? For daring to ridicule? But surely the woman had not had the penetration to see through it. Be that as it may, the place of music teacher was utterly lost to her and the search for a position must begin again.

CHAPTER III

Still it was not with a heavy heart that Lal set out the following day for fresh attempts. She had in her the eternal expectancy of eventually obtaining something, however small. She now hardly expected anything perfectly congenial, but she was confident that whatever it was, it would lead to better things. She had resolved to take the first thing that offered, leaving menial employment to the last.

She bought a morning paper and read through the advertisements, going over several twice and three times. It was a little disheartening to find that so many stenographers and typewriter operators were wanted. She knew nothing of either. She deeply regretted now the chance she had once for learning stenography and which she had cast aside as uninteresting at the time.

She marked the most promising of the others, however, and started out at once to answer them. The first, a merchant's office, demanded bookkeeping as well as the advertised qualities and she quickly announced her inefficiency in that line and departed. Angry at the waste of time, she answered the next one. But she was too late. The vacancy was filled now, and Lal turned wearily away.

The next was a jeweler's establishment, where the applicant was required to stand behind the counter and sell the less expensive of ornaments. But Lal had no references from her last employer. That would not do. Very sorry, the man condescended to add, admiring her tout-ensemble, but they had to be careful; you never could tell, their last assistant—

But she had walked out of the store, leaving him in the middle of a sentence.

And so through the long day she tramped from place to place, seeking employment and failing at every point. By nightfall her tired feet refused to press forward any further,

though she would not admit she was worsted. She did not sleep well that night and rose later than she had previously. It was after 9 when she set out, determined to get something. If it was to be housework, then it must be. She would not return again with nothing in prospect.

At noon, after a fruitless journey across the river in response to an advertisement calling for singers, only to find after she had reached her destination it was for a church choir where practically no salary was given, she returned to New York and boarded a cable car, feeling in no mood for food.

She got out at Broadway and Twenty-Fourth Street, intending to get a drink of something sustaining at a drug store along the busy thoroughfare. Just at present she wanted to rest her tired eyes by gazing absent-mindedly at the store windows. She walked along unconscious of the looks cast upon her by the habitués of Broadway. The sweetness of her face, unspoiled yet by carking care of city life, was a revelation to many.

There was much to interest the untried eyes of youth along this panoramic street. Lal could not remain oblivious to it. She saw so much in life that her eyes could not long retain their look of abstraction.

She began to find herself receiving impressions of the different types of humanity passing her or standing in groups in the doorways of the prominent hotels. Occasionally her now thoroughly aroused interest would cause her to look too long at some man and to her disgust it would be taken as a challenge and a smile would be the answer to the questioning look upon her face.

One man, more than ordinarily tall and finely formed, she found herself admiring from a purely physical standpoint as he approached her and passed her, walking rapidly Her startled eyes had barely taken in his features when she heard her name, her Christian name, with the polite prefix spoken.

Turning, in a moment she had recognized Yale Beresford.

With his hat in one hand raised in courtly acknowledgment, he extended his other hand for greeting. His clear-lipped, clean-shaven face expressed the deepest interest. Lal found herself coloring under his gaze.

"Mr. Beresford!" she exclaimed.

"Miss—do you know I never knew your last name?" he said, with a laugh in his dark eyes. "I tried to find out, but you successfully staved me off. But surely my letter was not so presumptuous as to merit the snubbing it got."

"Your letter?" (Oh! shades of Peggy, be grateful for your absence!)

Lal looked at him in wide-eyed surprise.

"Did you not get it? I sent it in care of Miss Kersey. Surely—"

"When? You really wrote to me?"

"Wrote you? Of course I did. Did you think I could resist it?"

"Why not?" and Lal's eyes frankly met his own.

"Let that go now. But you tell me you didn't get it. That makes it look very bad for your—she wasn't your sister, was she?"

"Yes, yes, the only one I ever had. You think it looks bad for her? I don't. She probably suppressed it from the very best of motives. But I'm sorry. You must have thought me very rude."

"No, though I confess I half expected a reply. That was such an interesting though all too short conversation we had that night. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember," and Lal's face became troubled.

"I beg your pardon," Beresford's voice was deep with sympathy. "Your father was taken ill—"

"He died that night, and—then I lost a brother."

"And you have moved to the city?" he ventured.

"Oh, no."

"But you are here for the day," persisted he. "Are you going back this evening?"

"No, I'm not going back this evening."

She looked at him and smiled at the expression upon his face.

"You don't want me to know anything about you, do you?" he said, in a mock injured tone.

"Not yet," she said, with little heed to the significance of the two words.

He seized upon it immediately.

"But—some time?" he asked, with a smile that lent an additional charm to his face.

"I don't know. How can one tell—so soon?"

He laughed a little.

"I know your mood," he said. "You want to indulge in a bit of badinage. I feel like it myself. But Broadway isn't the proper background. Have you lunched?"

"I—no, that is—"

"Which is equivalent to the fact that you haven't, but to the fancy that you would not like me to know it. But you will not be so cruel as to refuse to look at me while I eat."

"I certainly won't refuse you the eating part of the program—"

"But they are menus," he murmured audaciously.

She flushed a little, but laughed.

"You know what I mean," she said.

"In calm, cold English, you are shy about lunching with me. Come, aren't you now?"

"If you put it that way—"

"But I'd take very good care of you," he urged.

"I have no doubt of that. But—"

"But what?"

"I don't know you very well," she said, biting her lip. "I don't know that you ever were even properly introduced to me."

"People aren't properly introduced at *bal masques*," he

answered, "and if I judge you rightly, you are not one to stick to conventionality in anything. So now, that excuse doesn't hold good."

"Still—"

"—Delmonico's is very near;" they had been walking at Beresford's suggestion; "and you won't torment an already starving man?"

"Are you really starving?"

"Yes. I have been a long time." He looked at her and she lowered her eyes. "See what a chance in which to play the good Samaritan. Why, I've never had to press anyone quite so hard as this to lunch with me. This is the corner. Won't you come?"

Still she hestitated.

"If you don't, I swear I won't eat my luncheon to-day," he said, looking down at her.

"Are you in earnest?"

"Of course I am."

"Then I'll come."

"That's kind of you. What a lucky chance I ran across you to-day."

They entered Delmonico's at the side entrance and the first feeling of happiness Lal had experienced since leaving home came to her now, as she followed her companion across the heavy pile of the carpet to a recess where a table set for two was revealed.

"I shall imagine you are quite as hungry as myself," said Beresford, as with menu in hand he looked across at her. "Now, what shall I order?"

"Anything. I—"

"Anything I like, you'll like. Is that it?"

"Not quite. I have a capricious taste."

"So have I—not alone in food, either. Will you have oysters?"

She shook her head.

"This is not one of the 'R' months, don't you know?" she answered.

"Oh, but we are so close on to September. What does it matter?"

"I have been too near the sea all my life to be unwise."

"Well, I shall tempt you with something else."

He wrote out an order, consulting his menu with the obsequious waiter at his elbow.

"What kind of wine will you have?" asked Beresford without looking up from his tablet.

"Not any, thank you. I don't drink it."

"Ah! you must learn to drink it with me," he said with a smile.

"Must I?" The color had risen to Lal's face. "I shall never learn to drink it with anyone," she answered.

The waiter hurried away with the order.

"And now tell me," said Beresford, leaning forward on the table and looking at her, "why have you come to New York? You have come alone and for some time—that much I have learned. And I guess it is for a purpose. Come, why not confide in me? Perhaps I can help you."

"Oh, if I only could confide in you," said Lal, impetuously, looking at him in her quick, wistful way.

"Why not?"

"Why not?" she repeated musingly; "why, I don't know, but I know so little of you and—"

"You at least know that I am a gentleman."

"Oh, yes. I never doubted that. But answer me something, will you?"

"Anything, with pleasure."

"How did you come to be in Nineveh that night?"

"It's odd you should take an interest in that. I—"

"Oh, I don't," simply from Lal.

He looked crestfallen, but recovered himself immediately.

"Then why do you ask?"

"It was such a strange coincidence, that's all. And our meeting now. It's a little singular, don't you think?"

"A trifle," he admitted. "As to my being in Nineveh

that night it was for pure lack of something to do. The season was over, I was tired of being tired, and decided upon a recreation. One of my friends had a cousin in Nineveh. I learned there was to be a masked ball with plenty of rustics. I was curious to see the individual taste displayed. I went and—found you."

"And condemned my taste," she supplemented, merrily toying with a fork.

"Condemned it?" he echoed. "You know differently. It was the most ideally beautiful thing I ever saw. I'd give much to see you in such a costume again."

"Perhaps you may."

"Come now, 'a fair exchange,' etc. I have answered your question. Answer mine, please. Why have you come here?"

Only a moment, and then she met his eyes as she answered:

"To earn my living."

Beresford looked as he felt, thoroughly astonished. His face was full of genuine feeling when he spoke.

"My dear Miss—will you tell me your name, please? I don't know it yet. It's perfectly ridiculous."

"My last name is North."

"Thank you. I was going to say that I'm awfully sorry to hear this piece of news. I—"

"That I have to support myself? Why?"

"Why? Beause the world is awfully hard on women when they try to be bread-winners. It's against nature for them to do it. And the world cries out against it."

"That is a question I would like to discuss at length some time with you," said Lal, "but not now. Now it is a stern reality with me and I have been here in New York three days looking for something to do."

"And haven't found it?"

"And haven't found it. I am not desperate, quite, but I wouldn't be surprised if I became so. I have contemplated housework as a last resort."

"You? Housework? Never," said Beresford, with such firmness that she looked at him inquiringly.

"You, with your artistic hands, a housemaid?" he continued. "Why, it is ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous to starve," observed Lal, "and I shall do that if I consider too long and lovingly to what type my hands belong. Besides, I have a deep love of experience—any kind of experience, even though it is disagreeable. You cannot fail to learn from it."

"But—" interposed Beresford.

"You can't argue with me on that," she said emphatically. "I would go out of my way for experience. I would rather learn bitterly from experience chosen by myself than be guided by the advice of others."

"You'll get it," muttered Beresford. "You'll get experience. Sometimes we speak prophetically. Look out that this isn't one of the times."

The waiter here appeared with the dainty luncheon.

Beresford waited until he was out of range before he spoke again.

"What can you do?" he asked as he placed a squab upon her plate.

"Nothing much, I'm afraid. A little of everything, but that is such a poor accomplishment. You can never make anything out of knowing a little of everything."

"I don't know," said Beresford, helping himself liberally to potatoes. "I can paint (other than my face, I mean), fence, sing, play and am considered an all-round good actor. I draw a salary perhaps not quite sufficient for my own pretty expensive tastes, but enough to keep me going. And yet I am a typical Jack-of-all-trades. I have dabbled in every one of the arts."

"Haven't you deteriorated your one great talent at that rate?" inquired Lal.

"Not at all. They have each, individually, helped me. Have another marron glacée."

"No, thank you. One is enough."

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Well—if you must know, I don't think I'd be quite comfortable after eating another."

"But—but it would be an experience," he suggested maliciously.

She made a moué and he laughed.

Suddenly he looked at her with quite a different expression than heretofore.

"Have you ever been on the stage?" he asked abruptly.

"I have done amateur work and enjoyed it so," she replied, "but last year I gave it up."

"What did you play? Parlor comedies? Half-hour sketches?"

"Oh! no, indeed. We were more ambitious than that. We played 'The Rivals' one winter. We gave it five times in the hall. And 'The Lady of Lyons,' too."

"'Nay, nay, Pauline,'" he laughed. "You were Pauline?"

"Yes, though what kind of one I have my doubts about."

"I haven't. I wish I had been the Claude to you. I have played it many times."

"They are hard roles," she said; "so stilted and unnatural."

He made no response to this. There was a few moments' silence while Beresford concentrated his energies upon his luncheon. Presently, however, he pushed back his plate.

"That's it," he said, as if finishing aloud a mental problem; "that is the only, the very best thing for you."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"You are mystified," he pursued, "and naturally. But I can see your eyes change from mystification to surprise and from surprise to delight. You will be delighted, won't you?"

"Delighted with what?"

"Delighted with what I am going to do for you."

"What is it?"

"I am going to get you a position." Lal looked at him

breathlessly. "It won't be much at first, but it will be a beginning. How will you enjoy being an actress?"

"An actress? An actress?" She gave a laugh of glee. "Do you really mean it?"

"Ah, but it is not a life of joy," he began.

"Don't you suppose I know that? Do you think I was laughing for that? But the work. The happiness of independence. Oh! do you think I can do it?"

"I am certain of it. You have the essential quality—temperament. I know how you will make up. And that hair—'gad! you'll be famous for your hair in a month. The whole town will be raving about it."

"Oh, but it is kind of you," said she, her eyes sparkling with the vividness of her interest. "You are sure it will be no trouble?"

"Trouble? It will be the greatest pleasure I have had in many a day. You've heard of Childslea?"

"Oh, yes. I've seen him. He is a genius and was the god of our household for years. There is no one quite like Childslea."

"No, praise God," said Beresford with a grimace. "I beg your pardon; but you know you have only viewed him across the footlights. I've known him at rehearsal for seven years."

"Is he so terrible? The papers—"

"The papers tell the truth, whatever they say of him. And I never heard anything about the angelic quality of his disposition yet. But you shall see him and judge for yourself. What have you seen him in?"

" 'The Unregenerates,' 'An Italian Love Story,' and last winter in his last piece, 'For Better or Worse.' "

"He was the devil himself in that," murmured Beresford; and turning to her again he said: "I signed with Childslea this morning. He is making up his company for the season. I've been with him a number of seasons, though not consecutively. I played in Germany and England with him. My mother saved him from starvation once. He re-

membered it, magnified the debt and would do a great deal for me now, though I take my turn at rehearsals like the rest. I shall speak to him this afternoon about you. There are a few slight parts in his repertoire you could play with only your amateur experience."

"How can I ever thank you?" came from Lal in grateful tones.

"Pooh! it's nothing. You'll merit all the risks I'm taking. It's in you. Why the bend of your body is that of an artiste. I'm going to take you home now and leave orders that you must sleep until I call for you. No more tramping the streets. You will have found your right place on the stage."

CHAPTER IV

The hours intervening before Lal saw Beresford again were probably the happiest she ever knew, so utterly free from the alloy of doubt or uncertainty were they. She could hardly realize her good fortune and reflected how many a poor girl with probably greater talent than she was perhaps tramping the streets to-day, going from manager to manager, from agency to agency, seeking a position. And her lot had been to simply meet Beresford and a position was hers.

Hitherto she had deprecated the idea of influence, havin a notion that if what she obtained were gotten through other medium than that of merit, she would be continually unhappy in her self-reproach. But she had tasted the first bitterness, though distant, of dire extremity. She felt the ingratitude of caviling at what Fate had held out to her, even though it had been obtained simply because of another's interest in her.

When she thought of the profession which it seemed

she was now about to adopt as her own, she wondered her mind had not immediately turned to it at the beginning of her search for a position. But her love of literature was strong and among her friends she had been given the idea that should occasion arise for a means of livelihood, the world of letters was her realm. And literature and high dramatic art are so closely allied that a lover of one must be a lover of the other.

After all, all art is one art. In the man or woman, thoroughly in love with his or her chosen art, there must be struck a sympathetic chord for the sister branches. It is not possible that one who pursues the beauties of sculpture can be oblivious to music. And who that is truly musical, with voice or instrument, is indifferent to the music in books? Who that is artistic with crayon and brush turns a wearied eye from the artistic in the drama?

If there be found an exception, where the man or woman who courts one branch of the fine arts is indifferent to the sister one, be sure that man or woman exercises only the superficial senses—the mind is not involved in the case. The art is pursued only in the voluptuous sense. Here will be found the true dilettante.

John Shairp said: "The true poet is not an eccentric creature, not a mere artist living only for art, not a dreamer or dilettante, sipping the nectar of existence, while he keeps aloof from its deeper interest."

No truer words were ever written. Everything is summed up in that.

So Lal, lover as she was of all the fine arts, felt she would be brought in touch with all if she were closely associated with one. She was not unmindful of the fact that much that is degrading can surround even these beautiful uplifters of the mind. Music has its sensual side, painting and sculpture their nudities, literature its vileness, the drama its wantonness.

She was no untutored girl walking blindly into the temptations surrounding a life of constant change and excite-

ment. Her varied reading had not been for naught. Of her moral strength she was sure.

When Beresford came for her the following morning, she had been in readiness an hour. At the last, just before he appeared, the possibility of failure to get the position assailed her. Then her former hours of happiness were suddenly transformed to minutes of the most awful apprehension. She could scarcely control her agitation when he was announced.

He laughed as she entered the parlor, her face betraying the tumult within. He took both her hands in greeting and looked steadily a moment down into her eyes.

"You nervous little thing," he said; "it's all right. Didn't I tell I should get it for you? And you doubted me."

"But it all seems so incredible. Am I really to be in the company? It is such a fine organization. Childslea ranks so high."

"I hope you'll not be disappointed. But don't be so sanguine. Theatrical companies—even the best—but there! not a word of disillusion. You shall learn for yourself. As for the engagement, it is as surely yours as mine is mine. Of course we are going through a little red tape proceeding of allowing Childslea to look you over. He is a great one for looking people over, by the by. But it's a mere form this morning. You'll have your contract signed and delivered to you before noon to-day, that I guarantee."

She smiled from her eyes at him and Beresford approached her, regarding her attentively.

"You are so good to have done this," said she, retiring to a chair.

"I have never been told I was good before. Instead, it has been my daily food for some years past to hear the reverse. Perhaps I am a bad fellow. But am I to set the opinion of others at defiance and accept yours as the truth?"

"Not unless you care to," laughed Lal, as he stood before her, looking at her.

"And if I care to?" he asked.

"Then I should feel signally honored," she answered lightly; "but not for a moment would I keep the compliment as my own. I should have to remember," she paused and a smile flashed across her face. "I should have to remember that it was shared. Others have received the same from you."

"Ah! but what one says many times, lightly, one can mean once, sincerely."

He had drawn a chair close to her own and his eyes were seeking hers.

"Possibly. But how do you think the last one to listen to the—what shall we call it——platitude?—is affected?"

"That is what I am trying to determine."

"And do you think I so lack intelligence that I cannot see it—that you must resort to words?"

"Pardon me." He drew back and looked at her a moment as if at a loss. "I never doubted your intelligence."

"Then you will not try to make me believe things which are untrue, will you? What time are we due for our engagement with Mr. Childslea?"

He rose with some deliberation.

"Eleven o'clock," he answered, adding as he consulted his watch, "it is 10:30 now. Are you ready?"

"In a moment. I have to get my hat."

She returned directly with her jaunty blue chip tilted at the approved angle.

They went down the street toward Broadway.

Lal was cognizant that her companion was watching her narrowly. After one or two of his measuring looks had covered her she glanced up quickly.

"Well?" she said suddenly. "What is the thought?"

He laughed in a deprecatory way, but answered:

"I was just questioning whether you had lived in the country all your life or not."

"I have," returned Lal promptly, "and very rare have been my trips to the city. But you know, country-bred girls nowadays have not the rusticity nor the ignorance of former

times. The simplicity of the country maiden has been too long a danger-signal to herself. She knows better now."

Before they reached their destination Beresford bent toward her in the car, leaning his arm on the window ledge.

"You have forgiven me?" he asked.

"For what? For a slight miscalculation? Certainly I have."

"Thank you. I shall not miscalculate in the same way again. Here we are."

They got out and entered the building where Childslea's manager maintained private offices while the company was in New York.

In the elevator they met a young man whom Beresford knew, evidently one of the company. He was very tall and thin and had a teetering air of joviality about him that was half natural, half assumed. He had a mouth similar to a chipmunk and the effect was heightened by a screwing of the lips together moving rapidly up and down as he spoke. His teeth were like those of a nut-eating animal.

"A new member?" he asked, glancing at Beresford as that gentleman introduced him to Lal.

"Yes," replied Beresford briefly.

"In what companies have you played?" asked Mr. Burton, looking at Lal critically.

Beresford replied for her.

"Miss North hasn't had as much experience as you, Burton, but you mustn't be surprised if she ends in being leading lady."

"She'll be a marvel if she retains a position like that in this company. Nothing but an angel would suit Childslea, and even an angel would wear on him. When did you get your contract?" to Beresford.

"Yesterday. And you?"

"To-day. This morning. 'Father' isn't here yet, but the Governor is looking them over. I just saw Tanner. He's back with us again."

"'Father' is the company's sobriquet for Childslea,"

was Beresford's whispered explanation as they went along the hall; "for he's like anything but a father to us. The Governor is Mr. Temple, the manager."

They entered a pleasant room, where a man with white side whiskers was sitting at a desk talking to half a dozen people. His face was tired looking, and he spoke with no expression to his tones, never raising his voice. But it was the face of a gentleman, and kindly courtesy marked his bearing. This was Mr. Temple, the manager.

Conversation ceased as soon as Beresford's tall figure appeared in the doorway. No attention was paid to Burton, who went over to another desk, evidently to search for some papers in a drawer. But lively greetings were hurled from the group; and Lal caught a murmur of "Berry's protegé" from some one.

"How are you, people? Discussing your sins of commission or omission? Do you realize you are to be hanged, drawn and quartered in the next hour just byway of making you understand you are poor common mortals with no hint of genius in your compound?"

"Do we know the daily routine? Well, I guess," said young Chevalier, a handsome fellow of manly address.

"We are debating who will be the first victim," announced Miss Roland, a girl of twenty-eight or thereabouts, whose height verged perilously near awkwardness.

"Well, I think the raking fore and aft will not be so severe this morning," was Beresford's declaration. "You see, Miss North will be a sort of sop to the lion. I depend upon her to so propitiate him that he'll deal gently with us. This is Miss North, ladies and gentlemen, a new member of our company," indicating the company. "We are old comrades, having risen and fallen, chiefly fallen, together, when the blasting winds of Childslea's cyclonic wrath have swept over the horizon of our vision. We—"

"Hear! Hear!" shouted "Pop" Geoffries, the heavy old man, whose baggy eyes betrayed long years of revelry. "Be more circumspect."

"We, banded together as we have been, in a measure know each other and lie awake nights thinking how we can outwit 'Father's' wit and, incidentally, each other. But you must not try your wary wiles on Miss North."

Beresford's tones, though still mock heroic, carried a note of seriousness that his hearers were not slow to grasp.

"She is to escape, mark me well, Marcus Brutus and—the rest."

He struck an attitude and thrusting his hands into his breast pocket walked across the room in the exaggerated manner affected by some tragedians.

Lal laughed.

"For individual introduction, Mr. Beresford, I am quite sure the others would prefer you as spokesman. Will you take the platform now and honor me?"

"I'll take the stage—" began Beresford.

"You generally do," assented the others.

"It's your favorite place when 'Father' is off," observed Chevalier.

Beresford looked around with an expression of scorn.

"As for the honor, that is an open question."

"Haul him down! Put him out! Apology!" came in a chorus, mingled with laughter.

"Step lively now. I shall begin with the auction—er—the introduction. Allow me, Miss North, first to present for your critical inspection Frederick Lester Geoffries, otherwise known as 'Pop' Geoffries, a relic of the past, living on the reputation acquired in the palmy days of Wallack and the elder Booth. Isn't that so, Pop?"

"Yes, you popinjay; but if I live on a past reputation, 'gad, sir, you can't say the same for your present."

"No. Berry gets along on his looks," said one.

"Or his shape," giggled Daisy Gaye, the hairbrained soubrette of the company.

"Which is more than anyone present can say," pursued Beresford, unmoved. "To continue—next in the procession is Ned Chevalier, our leading juvenile, whose curling locks

have disturbed the tendrils of more than one maiden's heart—across the footlights."

"Happy to make your acquaintance," said Chevalier, with a magnificent bow to Lal, adding as he stepped aside, "Hope you don't mind him, Miss North. Out and out a jolly good fellow with us boys, but a bit tart in his hits."

"Jack Prince," continued Beresford, with a wave of the hand toward a handsome, selfish-looking man, of rotund figure, "old bachelor, possessing the envied distinction of being Ned's uncle, how, why, and just when we don't know. The gentlemen having been disposed of, will the ladies now please rise? Or no—we must be serious with the ladies. Miss North, Miss Roland—an old friend of mine, who accords me the prerogative of addressing her by her Christian name; Miss Baker, who never knows fear on a first night, and Miss Gaye, who objects to page's attire. Even in emergencies we are forced to hear this lady's pitiful appeals to be excused from the doublet and hose."

Lal instinctively recoiled within herself as her eyes rested upon Miss Gaye's face. The upper part was that of an angel—the lower, that of a courtesan. The other returned her look with one of keen speculation. She was measuring Lal's chances for success through physical attraction, and Lal saw it.

"These are not all the members?" asked Lal of Beresford, as the others rallied Mr. Temple for his preoccupation.

"Oh, no. These are the less important ones who are to sign to-day. The ones who draw the largest salaries were engaged yesterday. You'll meet them to-morrow. They're a mixed lot in this company in point of everything, even in intelligence. But you'll be able to choose correctly. Your intuitional powers are good, I take it."

"How did you know?"

"The curl in your third eyelash," he answered, smiling at her.

"Which eye?" answering the smile.

"Both. Why, aren't your eyes the same?"

"I hope so. But I can't tell as well as—"

"I'll tell you—some day—if you'll let me," he added judiciously.

Burton returned from another room.

"Childslea's come," he announced in a loud whisper with his fingers on his lips.

"Prepare to shake," said Beresford, cheerfully, to the others. "The Lord only knows his mood to-day. Come, Miss North, this way."

He stood aside to allow her to precede him through the ante-chamber.

As they entered, not a feeling of fear, but rather one of awe seized hold of Lal because in the presence of genius, because brought face to face with a man who had through his own indomitable will and tremendous brain power won the plaudits of half the civilized world.

Childslea had taken off his gloves, for he was ever fastidious about his attire, and stood by the window with his back to the light. The sunshine streamed full upon Lal, however; but though she was for a moment dazzled by it, she quickly recovered and looked at the man, struggling to gather from the first tangled impressions one receives of another some one distinct fact.

She saw a man near the meridian of life whose head would have been a puzzle as well as a study to a phrenologist. It set at defiance all fixed laws governing the science, for it fell away at the points where intellectuality reigns, coming almost to a dome at the top of the skull. And yet Childslea was world-renowned for his brilliant wit, his scholarly attainments, his keen satire. It was a criminal looking head and the man held it slightly forward as he walked, in the manner peculiar to law breakers.

Monstrosity, had Childslea been dubbed, a freak of nature, but nothing could alter the fact of his greatness. He knew men criticised, praised, berated, reviled, admired, re-

spected and cursed him, but he was indifferent alike to praise and blame. People crowded the theater to see him; he was making a fortune; he was satisfied.

Personally, he was a peculiar compound of distinction and insignificance. Of medium height, he gave the impression of short stature. His physique was perfect, suggesting the sinews and constitution of an ox, and this, though he was slight in figure. His hands, and particularly his feet, were unusually small for a man. His face was bitter and fierce by turns in expression. His mouth was firm, hard and somewhat cruel. His eyes were described as keen, by most people. But they were more than that. They had a touch of the sinister in them, and they could fascinate horribly by their unwavering fixity.

He advanced toward Lal, now, with the measuring side-glance characteristic of him, and bent upon her one of his prolonged stares. I don't know whether he wished, when using these eternal glances, to convey the impression that he was a profound reader of human nature (as he was) or that he desired to experiment upon the nerves of the unfortunate specimen in the thrall of his microscopical glance.

As he looked at her he did not speak for fully twenty seconds. Beresford had warned her coming up in the car what she might expect in this line, so Lal was on her guard. She returned his gaze unflinchingly.

"A candidate for histrionic honors, Beresford tells me," were Childslea's first words, spoken in the repressed, staccato tones he employed in private.

"A candidate who, I hope, will be elected, sir," Lal replied, inwardly marveling at the achievements of the man compared to the shape of his head.

"A good voice. Where have you studied voice culture?"

"I have attended no school and have had no instructor for it."

"You have natural talents then, cultivated through your own sense of beauty—oom."

He ended this sentence, as he often did others, with a

deep throat intonation that lent a weird effect to his speech.

"It is courteous of you to put it that way," said Lal.

"No experience, Beresford tells me."

"None, save amateur."

"Useless. The professional style is a thing by itself. You will learn quickly, though. You look bright—oom."

"Thank you."

"Temple has drawn up a contract here. Sign it now, if you please. You had better glance over it and see what you are running into—oom."

Lal took up the paper from the desk. By a hasty perusal she made herself acquainted with the fact that she was bound to the company for a season covering a period of thirty-two weeks at a salary of twenty-five dollars per week, with traveling expenses paid; that she was to play whatever role was assigned to her without question, and that her costumes would be assigned to her out of the funds of the company.

She looked up from the reading to cast a grateful glance at Childslea.

"A hundred dollars a month is a great deal," she said. "I hope I shall earn it. It is very kind of you."

"Is it? No one else would think so—oom. Temple will tell you what time to report at the theater to-morrow. There is a call for rehearsal. We have a few weeks of repertoire. Do you memorize quickly?"

"I think so."

"I don't want what you think—oom. What do you know?"

"Well, then, sir, I know that I memorize quickly."

"That is better. I want confidence among my players. That will do. Good morning."

He turned away and Beresford led Lal out into the hall, thus escaping the queries of the others.

"I feel that he is just tolerating me," she said to him as they waited for the elevator.

"Get rid of that idea quickly. Childslea never tolerated

a soul. He makes use of everyone—tremendous use, as you'll have the chance to see."

"But—do you think—I appeared very stupid?" she queried anxiously.

"Of course you didn't. He was taken with you. Didn't you see it?"

"No. Really? Was he?"

"Yes. He had his eyes on your hair. His wife's is something the same shade, though not nearly so beautiful, nor so abundant." Beresford's eyes rested upon the rich mass of hair gleaming under the blue of Lal's hat.

"I was overpowered by his greatness."

"You'll have the chance to be overpowered by many other things in him. I hope he will never be rude to you. If he is, by—"

"Is he ever rude?" exclaimed Lal.

Beresford smiled.

"I should rather think so," he answered.

CHAPTER V

Childslea was generally late at rehearsals. The call for them was usually made for 11 o'clock. They continued till 1, when an hour was taken for luncheon. By 2 the members had hurried back again, knowing that about half an hour later would bring Childslea swooping down upon them.

Sometimes a watch was kept for his advent. Burton or some other of the men would slip, now and then, to the inner door to glance along the passage-way from the storm door. One glimpse of him was enough to send the spy flying back to the stage with finger upon lips, the signal that "Father" had come.

Then lo! the transformation. From a bedlam of laugh-

ter and voices issued the calm that was always suspiciously near collapse. Beresford would cease his crashing songs on the piano, Chevalier would stop short in the middle of his "break-downs," the women would cease their silly shrieks of laughter, Geoffries would pause in the heart of one of his boisterous stories. A hush like magic would spread over everyone. And when Childslea's body, moving like a dart, had come upon them the stage manager was calling for Act Two with a face as impassive as marble.

These occasions were not rare. But sometimes the spy failed in his work, sometimes Childslea arrived at 12 o'clock in the midst of all the clamor and foolery. Then consternation seized upon each and every one, the most appalling stillness reigned and there was not one but wished for the trapdoor on the stage to spring open and engulf him.

Lal found much to interest, fascinate, amuse, annoy and disgust her. Jealousy among all, towards all, was terribly prevalent. Envy and malice lurked in the eyes of everyone for the one who was the recipient of some temporary favor from Childslea. Whoever was marked with special distinction by some word from the gentleman so dreaded and hated was immediately courted with sickening sycophancy by the others.

There were a few exceptions, however. Beresford never had to curry favor. Though Childslea stormed and swore at him as he did at the others, he treated him with more kindness than the rest. Williams, too, never was disturbed by Childslea from his calm equanimity. But he was the only man of genuine culture in the company. Childslea recognized in him his equal in intellectuality.

In turn, Lal met the other members. Childslea's wife, who had long been leading woman, fell ill and her understudy, a young woman very much on the same type as Mrs. Childslea, assumed her place. She was a slight little thing and received much of Childslea's ill humor. Lal often looked at her in wonder, marveling that such slight shoulders did not break under the strain.

In Mr. Tanner the girl found a man whom she instinctively trusted and liked from the first. He was happily married and his wife, though not an actress, traveled with him. He was uniformly courteous and Lal recognized in him the true gentleman. Of him and Mr. White only could this be said.

Childslea, though a man with princely manners toward people he met socially, was a cad at heart. To him the women in his company were nothing but actresses as he was wont, himself, to say of them. No respect for womanhood dwelt in him. It was a daily occurrence for him to insult the defenseless creatures employed by him. With such a heavy veneer it passed for the genuine article; he hoodwinked the admiring public, who know so little of a man's private life, into believing he was everything that is courtly and chivalrous. But it was entirely superficial.

With the others Lal found it much the same. Though respectful to her, always, because of the dignified attitude she took, she saw the light way in which the women of the company were treated. Even Beresford's manner toward them was one of careless indifference. Perhaps it is because actors spend so much of their time cultivating their stage manners that they pay little or no attention to their daily deportment. Certain it is, that with a few rare exceptions, they have neither the instincts nor the inclination of the gentleman.

Upon Mr. White, the stage manager, practically the entire responsibility of the company rested. He was a handsome man and his patience was the wonder of everyone who realized with what he had to contend. He was periodically discharged and reinstated. He bore injustice and insults without a murmur. Even when matters reached a climax, as they often did in the company, Mr. White's temper remained unmoved. He never raised his calm voice above moderate tones. What the company would have been and where it would have been upon several critical occasions I tremble to think, had it not been for Mr. White.

And Tommy! Dear, little, overworked, obliging, long-

suffering Tommy! Slight as a sapling pine that grows on the edge of a Kansas bluff, Tommy did the work of ten men. He was property man, call-boy, super, captain and a hundred other things rolled into one. He looked after the costumes and the endless et ceteras connected with so large an organization as Childslea's company. He was twenty-eight, but a mite of a lad, and looked little over nineteen. It was current that he never ate; certainly he slept only at rare moments.

Around 6:30 of an evening one might find him sitting upright in a chair, his senses locked in sleep, his face like that of the dead. No one could look at him steadily for a few moments without awakening him out of the most profound slumber. Down, then, would drop the tilted corners of the chair, and bounding from it Tommy would begin his evening's bustle.

Lal learned to love the little fellow in her warm-hearted way, and his call up the iron stairway—"Overture beginning to the first act—ple—e—ase—" never failed to bring a smile to her lips and a cheery word when he hurried past her dressing-room.

Then there was Madame Joseph, the wardrobe woman. To her kindness Lal owed not a little. When all was new and strange it was she whose thoughtfulness saved the committal of many a trifling mistake, which, however small, had it reached Childslea's ears, would have augured no good for Lal.

With her pretty face, her delicate coloring, her imperfect English and a quaint personality, she was as unique a figure as any in the company. Her hatred and admiration of Childslea were an odd mixture. Her strong expressions used in berating the actor for his brutality and fiendish temper were only equaled by her no less emphatic language when speaking of his greatness. And while she was the only one who openly expressed her opinion, her statements were eagerly assented to by all.

Childslea's attitude toward Lal was one of studied indifference at the beginning. Though he had not as yet used

insulting words to her, he glared at her if she deviated in a position upon the stage, or did not at once grasp his interpretation of a thing. His daily deportment at rehearsals was a revelation to her. Gradually this idol, this man of genius, belittled himself in her regard. Slowly, but surely, she discovered the pitiful feet of clay. And when she had discerned the greatness of the man lay only in his intellect; that his mind was warped by the littleness of tremendous vanity; that no nobility of soul was in him, her ideals suffered a terrible blow.

She could have forgiven all and continued her enthusiastic tribute to the man, overlooking even his frightful outbursts of temper, but to see woman after woman in the company degraded by his insulting expressions was more than she could endure.

She trembled to think of the time when she herself might be the object of his blackguardly attacks. Railings and stormings she felt she might deserve if she erred in betraying her ignorance, but insults she felt she could not brook.

She expressed her fear of her self-control to Beresford one morning after her excited nerves had been keyed to their highest pitch by listening to Childslea mimic and burlesque Miss Roland's rather peculiar gait to her face.

Beresford smiled amusedly into her sparkling eyes as Lal expressed her anger at the scene which had just been enacted before them.

"If his own wife is not exempt, can you expect a line to be drawn anywhere?" was his reply. "Mrs. Childslea tried to throw an extra amount of expression into her part one morning and she was doing it mighty well, too, but the cad wanted to humiliate her and he shouted at her before the entire company, 'What do you think you are? A second Bernhardt?' Pretty talk to a woman and that woman his wife! Yet she adores him. But you wouldn't forego all chance of advancement, would you, by letting your tongue get the better of you with him?"

"*I would forget* everything I ever wanted to attain if

he once spoke to me as I have heard him speak to some here," said Lal.

"That's what they all say. But when the moment comes they remember their utter dependency. How dependency silences one!"

"I should remember that, I suppose," sighed Lal, "for I should be very much alone if I lost my position here."

"You could never be alone," said Beresford.

She looked at him.

"I have told you all about my relations with my family. Indeed, I would be alone with only my own strength to rely upon."

"You always forget me," he murmured; "why do you persist in that?"

"You have been most kind to me. I always remember that," said she gratefully, "but—"

"What?"

"You are such a man of the world, you know. You have such a flattering manner toward one. You don't suppose I can consider that I am the only one to attract your interest?"

"All or none, eh?" he replied, laughing; "you are one of the kind to demand perfect allegiance?"

"Certainly. Who wishes a divided—"

"Love?" he interposed quickly.

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it."

"Did I. Miscalculation is a failing of yours."

She turned to Mr. Tanner to address a remark. As she did so, Childslea's stentorian voice rang across the stage.

"Cease your gabbling over there. What do you think I can accomplish in this devilish racket? Beresford, watch your cues."

As a mere whisper was to Childslea as loud as a yell, in his irritable moments, conversation for the most part was relegated almost to dumb show. The rehearsal proceeded amidst a grave-yard stillness. Anyone who had to cross the stage at back was forced to do so on his tiptoes, and woe-

to the luckless one when a board creaked! The batteries of Childslea's wrath were poured broadside at the miscreant.

The greatest attention was being given to the first night's production, which was to be "Richard III." In this Childslea towered above everything else he did, and he exacted the best work from everyone to the merest detail. To-day's rehearsal was with the scene set for the entire first act, and with many of the necessary personal properties.

Burton, who was general utility man as much as anything, for his acting was of the most nondescript kind, played the first gentleman with the halberd in the fore of the procession which bears the body of King Henry VI. toward Chertsey.

To-day his deliverance of his single line, "My lord, stand back and let the coffin pass," enraged Childslea beyond bounds. The reason was a small one. Burton did not clip the "my" short enough to suit his taskmaster.

"You blithering idiot!" bellowed Childslea, "can't you say 'm' lord' instead of 'my lord?' You are not addressing the Deity. I'm not God, whatever you may think me—oom. Now then, no funny business—keep your eyes on me," he yelled, turning to Daisy Gaye, who during the brief moment of fancied security from Childslea's watchful eyes had dared to glance out into the auditorium; "quit your smirking and ogling at the orchestra. If you glance down there once at night I'll discharge you."

Burton repeated his line, when he dared, and the scene proceeded. But it was to be a weary morning before the worn-out creatures were through with it all.

Childslea swore terribly as Miss Vincent, the leading woman, as Anne, had gotten half way through her first speech.

"In your artistic career were you taught to mouth your words like this?" he said in biting sarcasm, and with sneering face and horrid mouths he imitated her enunciation with brutal exaggeration; "if you intend to continue this cheap theatricalism you can get out of this company—oom. Go *back and begin again.*"

Miss Vincent, quivering before the public rebuke began her speech again, but she had proceeded only to "fill'd it with cursing cries and deep exclaims" when she was rudely interrupted.

"What in the devil do you mean by whining out your tones like that? Is that the only way in which you can express agony? My God! why are people such monuments of stupidity? Begin again"—his wonderful voice was harsh now, and had lost all semblance to the cultured tones that charmed his audiences—"and use your intelligence—what little you have."

With an effort the trembling woman pulled herself together and began her lines for the third time.

Childslea stamped his foot in fury.

"How long am I to stand this damned mummery? White—White—where in the devil do you keep yourself, you blithering idiot?"

"Yes, Mr. Childslea; yes, Mr. Childslea," answered White, hurrying forward not three feet removed from the now insane actor.

"Dismiss these fools. Discharge Burton. He's an ass. Give this woman her papers too. She hasn't an ounce of brains. Where in God's name did she get such a head?"

"But, Mr. Childslea," Mr. Temple remonstrated from the auditorium. White had quietly acquiesced and retired for the nonce.

"Go to the devil!" roared Childslea, "this is my company —oom. I'm master here. What do I pay you all for anyway?" to the silent company standing miserably in front of him.

He made two or three frantic turns up and down the stage.

"To think I should be called upon to suffer this!" he went on at white heat, lashing himself unconsciously with the thin little cane he carried, "I—with the position I hold! And people call this art!"

He stalked across the stage, turned rapidly into the passage-way and disappeared. The company breathed again.

A general sigh of relief swept the groups of actors scattered about the stage.

"White," called Mr. Temple, as he advanced down the aisle to the footlights, and the stage manager hurried to lean across them to catch the command, "go on with the rehearsal."

CHAPTER VI

An hour later Childslea returned, his reason in a measure restored. The spirits of the company, revived upon his departure, were duly subdued again as soon as the advance guard who had been watching, suspecting his return, flew back to the stage to give the warning.

Childslea paused for a few moments' pleasantry on his way to the table down by the footlights.

Daisy Gaye sat among three actors with her legs crossed and her arms folded, as the draught upon the stage was a severe one.

"Is that the way for a lady to sit?" demanded Childslea, kicking the soles of her shoes with his foot; "change your position—oom."

He passed on, leaving the enraged actress glaring at him.

Burton was talking to White as Childslea came up.

"You talk too much, Burton," was Childslea's comment, as he eyed the young man in his diabolical manner.

"Yes, Mr. Childslea, but I tell very little," was the response.

"True. I should have remembered your limitations. Now, White, if you've managed to knock some sense into the pates of these dunderpates we'll begin the first act again —oom."

"Yes, sir. Who'll read Miss Vincent's part?"

"Miss Vincent? Why she, herself. Who else?"

"But you have discharged her and Burton."

"What if I have? What if I have? Must they believe every word I say—oom? Tell me that."

"Burton has been with us long enough to understand," began White diplomatically, "but Miss Vincent is new. I'm afraid she has taken you at your word. She—"

"But the play can't be stopped because of a woman's whim. Get her back—get her back—you understand—oom?"

"Yes, Mr. Childslea. And if she will not come?"

"Raise her salary. Don't you know your business yet? Raise her salary. Money will always bring a woman to terms—oom."

Mr. White despatched a messenger with a note to Miss Vincent's apartments. The rehearsal continued, and finally at 5:30 the wearied company was dismissed after being told to report at 7:30 that evening for a last rehearsal. It was Sunday and the following night was the opening night of repertoire.

Late as it was, Mr. White detained Lal as, with little ceremony, the others betook themselves from the hated theater. She did not know it then, but Beresford was in the stone passage-way smoking a cigar while waiting for her release.

"Miss Vincent has returned, Miss North, but there's no telling what will happen. It is best to be prepared for emergencies," said Mr. White, as his thoughtful eyes scanned her closely, though far from impertinently; "I want to test your voice in Lady Anne. Just read this scene, will you?"

He handed her a copy of the scene between Gloster and Anne where the funeral procession is interrupted.

"I know it," said Lal, putting the book down; "I have recited it."

She stood in the center of the stage and gave it, feeling every line she uttered, carving her words clearly and expressively before she let each one fall.

Mr. White made no comment as she concluded, but he said:

"Keep the part in mind. There are always unheard of chances occurring in this company, owing to—" he paused a moment, then continued, "people being dismissed summarily and then refusing to come back when they are told they can return."

"Thank you," said Lal, "it is very kind of you to take this interest."

"Not at all, not at all," said the stage manager kindly; "you are in earnest. We rarely see one who loves the work as you do. Money is the chief factor in the lives of the women of the stage. That's why so many of them go wrong. It is easier for them to get money in this life than in any other profession."

"Yes, I know," said Lal, "so few seem to understand the art, much less care for it. This has been a trying day, Mr. White. You have had so much to bear."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a hard game," he said; "push and nerve, products of this generation, win. Every man for himself. I hope you'll be able to stand all the rebuffs you are bound to receive."

"I expect to. I have set my teeth together," returned Lal, with a little laugh to show her cheerfulness.

"Take care they don't remain so until your nature hardens. You are unspoiled yet. Now you have hardly time for dinner before you must report again. Won't you take dinner with me somewhere?"

"Oh, no, thank you. It's very kind of you, but I would rather not."

"Well—some other time perhaps."

He raised his hat and turned to the table as she bowed and left him.

Beresford sprang to his feet, flinging aside his cigar as Lal came through the passage-way.

"I did not think you were waiting," she said, a little coldly, as he opened the door for her.

"I hardly have the temerity to hope you ever think of me," he replied, looking at her with an air of meekness that did not belong to him at all.

"You are a curious compound of dare and humility," she answered, looking forgiveness already from her eyes.

"Humility has really no place in me," said he with truth, "but you make me take a shy at it after a fashion. Now this afternoon, that was a slip. I didn't mean it. You don't bear me any malice, do you?"

"No malice, of course not."

"What then?"

"Well—I resent your attempts at trifling with me."

"Trifling? Oh, Miss North, you don't really believe that of me? Do you? Do you?"

There was a genuine ring to his voice that made her heart beat faster for a moment. He leaned anxiously forward to look at her as they walked along.

"I have had to think so," she confessed slowly, returning his glance, "but—"

"But what?" he queried eagerly.

"I hated to do it."

"Bless you for that. You won't think so of me in the future, will you? I am not trifling. I am in earnest."

"In earnest? I hope so. Those who are not in earnest have no right to live," she answered quickly.

He drew in his lower lip quickly, a trick he had when brought to a standstill.

"You know my meaning, you clever child," he said, "but if I wanted to explain so you could not elude me it would not be here on Broadway. Do you realize it is 6:30?"

"Yes, and I've been trying to reach Fourth Avenue to take a car to the house for dinner."

"Ah! but you are going to take dinner with me. There is the Holland House ahead of us."

"Dine with you? This is the first I knew of it."

"It is. But what difference?"

"I refused Mr. White's invitation."

"Mr. White is—Mr. White. You wouldn't treat me the way you would him, would you?"

"Why not?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Certainly."

"Well, then, Mr. White can't care for you as—"

She colored and answered hastily.

"I will dine with you. Had we not better hurry? I don't want to be late at the theater."

He smiled as his dark eyes regarded her thoughtfully.

"You said you wanted to know," he whispered maliciously, as they went up the carpeted entrance.

"Yes, but how could you tell me in such a place?" she murmured as they passed in, and her eyes had a light in them that he recognized.

"Because I am impatient of waiting," he answered, adding daringly, "but I shall not wait much longer."

Then her manner changed as it often did with no warning.

"'Shall not' is such a strong verb," she replied; "I generally avoid people who use it often."

Her color had heightened, and Beresford's eyes showed their admiration plainly. But he said, evenly enough:

"There are some people who will not be avoided. Don't you know that?"

"Yes, but then they become disagreeable and we show our dislike for them, and then, if they are not fools, they retire."

She was laughing at him across the table now, and he returned the challenge of her eyes, but there was something in his glance that made her hand tremble a little.

"They are fools unless they do retire?" he questioned.

"Certainly."

"Well, I think differently. When a woman rebuffs a man and he retires, then is the time he is a fool. A woman would not rebuff me. I'd love her till she loved me in return and then—I'd win her." His teeth gleamed in a smile.

"In other words you are what the Scotch call 'magerful.'

Well, women who are ruled, love the mightiest, and the men who rule them gain the fullness of their love."

"Where do you get your philosophy?"

"Do you call it philosophy? Then all women are philosophers. For this knowledge about men is innate with the weakest of us."

When they had returned to the theater Miss Nash, a young woman in the company who was a finished musician employed by Childslea to play the incidental pieces upon the piano, came up to Lal and Beresford.

She was very tall, with large lips which she moved clumsily, aggravating their ugliness. She had a foolish affectation of speech and manner and pronounced such words as "south" and "mouth" as if they were spelled "sooth" and "mooth." She made eyes at all the men and said mean things about the women. But when she touched the keys of the piano she put such feeling into what she played that much was forgiven her.

She was occasionally asked to join the Childsleas at the Sunday night dinners given by them in their handsome home. The invitation was extended so that the brilliant gathering of professional men and women whom Childslea loved to gather round him might enjoy the beauty of her music. But Miss Nash considered that her personal charm had as much to do with the fact of her being invited as anything else. She was the only member of the company aside from Beresford who had ever received this honor, and she was addicted to the habit of boasting of it.

Now she approached Beresford and Lal in her carefully studied walk. Lal never talked to her if she could avoid it, for she was doubtful of her.

"Are you to be at the Childsleas to-night after rehearsal, my lord Beresford?" she asked, ogling him and enjoying what she thought was Lal's envy.

"Yes. Late though," answered Beresford briefly.

"One meets such clevah people at the Childsleas. So different from the people of the theater, you know. Don't you think so, my friend with *les beaux yeux*?"

"That is a matter of opinion. Certainly one meets no one quite like you there," replied Beresford with a grin.

"Thank you," with a sweeping bow, as she reveled in the delight of the appropriated compliment, and turning to Lal she said, "you cawn't imagine how pearfectly chawming it is at the Childsleas. They—"

"No, but she'll have a chance to judge to-night," interrupted Beresford, pressing Lal's arm unseen. Lal smiled a little, understanding, though she had almost lifted a face of astonished inquiry to Beresford.

Miss Nash swept upon her the glance of well-bred surprise she had learned to cultivate with much labor.

"Really?" she drawled, "you don't tell me. Quite an acquisition," with a thinly veiled sneer.

"Rather—to the guests," retorted Beresford with unmistakable emphasis.

"There's Mr. White. I want to speak to him," and Miss Nash hurried away.

Beresford laughed a mellow chuckle that was always pleasant to hear.

"Miss Braggart must get a dose of her own medicine occasionally. How a woman like that disgusts one! That was an admirable piece of self-control, you child of nature. I was almost afraid you were going to betray the fact that you were unenlightened as yet. I meant to tell you later. Will you come to-night to the Childsleas?"

"Why, have I really been invited?"

"You have."

He didn't tell her he had asked for the invitation for her.

"Why, how?"

"Mrs. Childslea was here for a moment to-day. I saw her and she spoke of you."

"How kind of her," murmured Lal; "she is such a sweet woman anyway."

"Then you'll go?"

"I should love to. But won't we get away from rehearsal late?"

"About 11. We've played the piece before. It's not like a brand new affair. Supper will be served at 12. We'll get away about 3."

"What dissipation! Do you think I can stand it?" ingenuously.

Beresford smiled.

"You've got the next day to rest in," said he, "haven't you? It won't hurt you. I want you to meet some cultured people. Childslea isn't quite such a brute in his own home before what he calls his equals."

"I am glad of that."

"Then you'll come?"

She hesitated a moment. Then she looked up with the shy smile that was peculiarly hers.

"With you?" she asked.

Beresford's eyes expressed much.

"With me," he said, and there were certainly masterful tones in his deep voice now; "do you think I'd let you go with anyone else?"

CHAPTER VII

Quite another scene than that to which she had been accustomed met Lal's eyes at the theater the first night of Childslea's appearance during the new season.

She arrived early, as Madam Joseph had offered to "make her up" and initiate her into the mysteries of the doublet and hose. For it was as the young son of the Duke of Clarence that Lal was to make her debut. Her part did not consist of more than ten lines, but Childslea knew when he gave it to her that her face was the type to set off the pathetic to perfection.

Behind the scenes to-night, as early as 6:30, it was apparent that great work lay ahead of everyone. Tommy was here, there, and everywhere, his spidery figure now ap-

pearing through the door of a scene, now disappearing back of a drop. A thousand things devolved upon him, and he hurried from dressing-room to dressing-room delivering last messages, hearing last complaints.

The scene shifters were taking preliminary cat-naps on barrels, boxes or anything that would answer for a rest, well knowing that it would be after 12 before their hard-worked bodies could obtain respite from labor.

Occasionally the lilting air of some operatic melody was trolled out from a dressing-room. The deep laugh of a man could be heard through the stone corridors, immediately silenced by Mr. White's loud whisper of "Hush—sh!" up among the flies, endeavoring to inspire a proper gravity into the heads of the light-minded ones.

The great curtain was rolled down and Lal stole on to the dimly lighted scene set for the first act, to peep through a hole. But it was dark yet in the auditorium, and she turned to hasten to her dressing-room. A hand was laid lightly upon her shoulder. It did not need even the faint glimmer from the lamp set on a table in the center of the stage for her to distinguish who it was. There was but one touch in the world that had the power to send a tremor through her whole being.

Beresford stepped with her out into the wings under the lowered lights, for she had moved at once when she realized it was he.

"You did not wait for me," he was saying, with deep reproach in his voice, "and I called for you at the house."

"Oh, I'm sorry. But it was growing late and I have much to do." She moved nearer the iron staircase.

"You just delight in giving me the slip, don't you?" he said, as he barred her way with his magnificent body; "do you realize that you can't do it always?"

"I don't realize anything at present but that I must get to my room right away."

"You don't go on till the second act," he said.

"I know it. But think, I've never had a lesson in 'make-

up'. We didn't use rouge at home in private theatricals. And my—"

He smiled, for she was blushing furiously.

"Your what?" he queried interestedly.

"The doublet and hose, you know. I never—"

"I suppose not. But you won't feel ill at ease in them, will you? You'll ruin your scene if you let any thought of your attire upset you. Are you nervous at all?"

"Well—just a little inward shakiness. It will pass away. Now let me by. I hear Madam Joseph talking to Miss Roland. She—"

Still he detained her. He put his hand upon her arm, but she moved away.

"Don't do that," she said firmly, "and if you please, I should like to pass."

He stepped aside and she slipped by him. But he stood at the foot of the stairs with his hand upon the railing and his head raised. His eyes followed her and she knew it. She reached the landing, glanced down at him, giving him one swift look, then turned and fled up the stairway.

When Madam Joseph had put the last touch to the young face and caught together the last hook and eye of her costume, Lal looked at herself in the mirror.

The addition of pearl powder rouge and pencil had utterly transformed her. She inspected carefully the green velvet and silk of her apparel. She made a dainty boy, a figure to arouse the sympathies.

"It is a goot leg," decided Madam Joseph, nodding as she watched the object that seemed to hold Lal's attention longest; "nuddings you need be ashamed of. Nice. So nice. You are not—how you say it?—modiste, are you?"

"I hope so," ejaculated Lal, adding, "I am not nervous because of this display. It's really very little. The skirt comes to my knees."

"Oh! Moses me! Dot wig! It is no goot to your own hair," sighed the wardrobe woman.

"But my own hair is so long. I couldn't possibly wear it as a wig," said Lal.

"Nefer mind. No, dearie, I know. Sometime you can. I want to see dot time."

A large number of "supers" were needed in the first act to make up the funeral procession. Lal hung in the flies entranced at the moving spectacle below her. Tommy's call had vibrated up the iron stairway—"Everybody down for the first act, ple—a—ease."

Childslea was fretting and fuming in his dressing-room. Burton, with his late reprimand in mind, was going around like one demented, uncertain still as to "my lord," or "m' lord." Mr. Williams and Mr. Tanner moved around with quiet dignity, undisturbed by the oaths and excitement. Miss Roland was pinning a satin bow in place on Ned Chevalier's breast. Daisy Gaye was playfully poking Prince who, arrayed as Richmond, was looking very uncomfortable in his heavy new coat of mail. She succeeded in finding vulnerable spots in the fat Duke's armor, for he doubled and twisted as he endeavored to suppress his giggles, imploring her to stop. Miss Vincent, the whiteness of whose face could be detected through her rouge, was conning her lines as she stood partially sheltered behind a scene.

Then Lal saw Beresford, resplendent in his robes of Buckingham, emerge from the head of the staircase leading down under the stage where many of the men dressed. She saw his swift glance absorb everything of the scene around him, noted the look of disappointment as his eyes roved from face to face and—well, she was only cognizant that her heart was going like a triphammer. Then she drew back a little, for she saw he was looking up among the flies. But he had seen her and quickly crossing the stage he made the stairs to the second floor.

His eyes eagerly scanned her, even to the minutiae of her costume.

"You pretty boy!" he exclaimed; "you would have moved Richard's heart if you had been his nephew."

"And you, my lord Buckingham, look imposing enough

to defy the wicked usurper and his hosts," she answered gayly.

"But I shall not be. We all bend and break before him to-night. I wish I were Jack Prince for to-night, though. There is some comfort in a mock victory, and if I were playing Richmond I'd pin Richard to the earth with relish. Are you frightened?"

"Not a bit."

"That is as it should be. Now come downstairs and watch this act from—"

"But I can see very well from here."

"I can get you a better place than this. It's draughty here and you are not protected."

He glanced at the nether part of her body.

"Won't I be in the way?"

"Not at all. I know just the place for you. Let me go first. These stairs are slippery and you might fall."

"Oh, but I have on these soft, velvet things," and she protruded her foot.

"No matter. It is nec—. There! But for me you might have sprained your ankle."

She had slipped as he was speaking, and had he not been in advance she would have fallen. As it was, he caught her in his arms, holding her close to him a moment. Only for a moment, for she had regained her feet almost instantly.

"Thank you," she said with dignity, ignoring his hand to help her down the remaining steps and relying upon the railing alone.

"I can't say as much, you willful child. Now alongside that drop over there you'll be able to see everything."

They had reached the other side of the stage.

"You'll get tired standing," said Beresford, looking vainly around for something in the guise of a seat, "and we can't get a chair in here. But—see here, sit on this big box. That'll do nicely, won't it?"

"Beautifully—if I can get up."

"That's a bagatelle. Use me as a step-ladder."

He leaned over a little, holding out his hands clasped, palms uppermost.

"Come," he urged as she hesitated.

She lifted a velvet shod foot, felt his warm hand close firmly over it, gave a little spring and had reached the eminence.

Beresford reluctantly took his hand away.

"Such a wee foot! Why, what size is it? It isn't as large as that of a child of twelve."

"Mr. White is trying to attract your attention from the other side of the stage. Go. He wants you," she said, drawing away from his ardent eyes.

"I don't want to go," he answered; "why do you try to get rid of me always? Can't a cat look at a king?"

"Aren't you mixing genders?"

"Well—can't a mouse look at a queen?"

"Miss Roland is the Queen to-night," she replied, as that lady's tall figure passed near them in the sable velvets and glittering crown of Queen Elizabeth.

"Not my queen," murmured Beresford, with a look her eyes fell under.

"Father is yelling for you, Berry," said Burton, coming up hurriedly; "he's in a devil of a stew. Swears you've appropriated the necklace he wears in the palace scene."

"I don't know anything about his jimcracks," replied Beresford.

"Anyway, he wants you."

"The devil he does!" Turning to Lal he said: "I shall not see you again before I go on. Watch me from here. I want your criticism. Will you give it to me?"

"If you don't mind my speaking honestly."

"No I love it—from you."

He hurried away, his handsomely accoutered figure a marked one among the glitteringly appareled men.

Burton's eyes followed him enviously.

"Lucky dog, Berry is," he said to Lal; "gets his way *every time.*"

She vouchsafed no reply to this. Burton went on.

"Father'll probably swear at him because he can't lay his hands on his necklace and then wind up with an invitation to dinner after the play. We all crawl, but Berry. I say, Miss North, as a friend let me give you a piece of advice. Don't put too much faith in Beresford."

"Advice unsought is rarely taken, Mr. Burton. I prefer to manage my own affairs."

"Oh, it is an affair then?" returned her companion, with his effeminate laugh.

"Mr. Burton!" Lal's tones rang out with the clarity of a silver bell, causing Mr. White to hasten from across the stage with the inevitable "Hush—sh."

"I beg your pardon," came Burton's apology, but Lal felt the sting of his innuendo and her face set in a cold mask of displeasure.

He made a weak attempt to continue conversation, was unsuccessful and retired.

Then the curtain went rolling up on the first act of the gloomy play and Lal's first glimpse of art from the wings began. Very hard at first she found it to penetrate back of the convincing bareness of the sham around her, for the heart of what she sought. Watching the actors waiting for their cues in the wings was very different to the times when she had sat in front with the illusion over all. She could see them talking in whispers, exchanging jokes, convulsed with silent laughter as they stood in the embrasure of a bit of projecting scenery. The expressions of their faces changed with lightning-like rapidity as the moment came for them to make their entrance. She saw all this and with it saw, too, much of the poetry of dramatic art pale before her mental vision. Sighing, she leaned her head against the brick wall.

But when the malignant form of Richard had come upon the scene, his evil face leering horridly as he charged the bearers to set down the corpse, all was changed. With breathless interest she leaned forward at the imminent risk of losing her balance and toppling forward.

With staring eyes she watched, fascinated, the deformed mass of wickedness woo the Lady Anne, shouting aloud his boasts of ghoulish glee till they seemed to assume kinship with the mad paeans of hell.

This was greatness, and she honored it with her absorbed interest, forgetting all else save that the prince of artists moved before her eyes and appalled her by his genius. And when the last burst of wicked exultation had found vent in the words:

> "Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass
> That I may see my shadow as I pass,"

the girl was overwhelmed by it all, and as the curtain went down on the thunderous applause in front, her own hands were adding as great a tribute of admiration as any.

So wonderful was the spell that Childslea's acting had cast upon her that it was a veritable inspiration to her for her own small part. By the time she was called for her own scene she was saturated with the spirit of the somber play. She needed no encouraging words from either Beresford or the stage manager to send her forward on the stage, with the daughter of Clarence and the old Duchess, with the tragic sadness of her face not one whit assumed.

She spoke her lines with the solemnity of awful despair, yet shading them with a touch of boyish faith in Gloster.

Beresford was watching her from the wings, his face alight with a new emotion. His own turn to go on with Richard and his train came at the conclusion of the pathetic scene. He had the opportunity to speak to Lal upon the stage unnoticed, but he was reluctant to dispel the rapt expression of her face. Only as she passed him in her exit did he bend forward with a kindly movement as if according the young scion courtesy, and whispered,

"Bravely done, little girl."

And somehow the sweetness of his praise was more to her than would have been any commendation from Childslea.

Drawn by a power she could not resist, after that Lal haunted the wings. She would not take the time to change her clothes between the acts, fearing she would miss something, so she stood close in behind one of the sheltering scenes watching with intent eyes what transpired.

She was unaccustomed yet to the rouge upon her lips. In her excited interest she forgot that she might have allayed much discomfort by removing it with her handkerchief.

It was with parted lips from other causes then than interest that she watched the stage. So intent was she upon the scene where Richard spurns Buckingham's appeal for favor, that Childslea had made his exit and was beside her in the wings before her astonished senses had grasped the fact. As soon as he had gained shelter from observation he vigorously began sucking his finger.

"The devilish necklace cut my finger," he said, inspecting the slight abrasion of the skin the heavy ornament about his shoulders and waist had made.

Lal expressed her sympathy.

"My life's blood—oom," murmured the actor, still sucking the cut.

Lal could not restrain her low laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded fiercely, approaching closer.

"At your remark, Mr. Childslea."

"And what was there so funny about my remark—oom?"

"Nothing, only that you referred to your life's blood as being in your fingers."

"Well, where is one's life's blood? Tell me that—oom. You seem to have a head, which is more than can be said usually of your sex—oom."

"Your life's blood, Mr. Childslea, must be in your brain," was Lal's reply, with honest admiration.

"OOM. Have a taste then," he said, and roughly stuck his finger in her mouth.

In another instant, before she had recovered from the outrageous action, he was back upon the stage, having heard *everything* that had been going on.

Before the week was over Lal was thoroughly convinced of his insanity. Genius verges perilously close upon madness. Childslea's genius was unquestioned, and there were few who doubted the fact of his lunacy as time proceeded.

The second night "An Italian Love Story" was presented. In this play Beresford had a strong part. He received a curtain call with Childslea and Miss Vincent. Beyond a temporary hitch in the curtain, which threatened to reduce Childslea to merely scattered pieces or exploded humanity, there was nothing to cloy the applause so sweet to Beresford's ears when he realized a share of it was for him.

Flushed with success he hurried to the second flight in the flies, after his best scene, which was practically his last in the piece, where Lal had watched the whole of the play. Childslea had comparatively a small, though a wonderfully versatile part in this. Hence, the intensity of interest which he alone controlled was lacking. Lal could view the acting of anyone else with critical eyes. In regard to Childslea's she was dumb, as her absorption would not permit criticism. This is art in its truest sense.

Beresford was as eager as a novice for her praise. But as soon as he saw her face he knew she had not been moved.

"Well?" he said a little resentfully, "you didn't like it, did you? And it's my strongest part."

"It is a very clever thing."

"What? The play? Of course. But I don't mean that. I asked you your opinion of my acting last night. You said you'd give it to me."

"You won't like it."

"What difference? It will be the truth."

"Yes, certainly that, if nothing else."

"Well—out with it. What's wrong?"

"You forget your part. You play to the boxes," said Lal slowly, and her words showed critical survey of what he had done.

He laughed a little.

"I've been accused of that before," he answered her, "but think how monotonous it grows. A fellow's got to have some diversion. And if he can find it in a pretty face in a box, why not play to the fair occupant?"

"How can you so lose sight of your calling?" she queried in grieved tones.

"Enthusiasm with me is gone. Youth is going. I have had the monotony of twenty years' experience; you have had the novelty of one night's freshness. Did you see that pretty woman in Box C?" he added, looking at her closely.

"I didn't notice the audience to-night."

"Beautiful face, and such a gown! It was black with spangles, and showed her figure perfectly," he continued, watching her narrowly; "I couldn't keep my eyes off her."

"You must have embarrassed her."

"I hope not. There isn't a more pitiful sight than to see a lovely woman hopelessly embarrassed. She caught my eye once. I admired her immensely," he added with fervor.

Lal looked up.

"Did you?" she asked simply.

Beresford took a step nearer.

"I can't make you jealous, can I?" he queried.

"Why should I be jealous?"

"Why indeed?"

Then Ned Chevalier came out of his dressing-room along the hallway and the conversation was turned.

CHAPTER VIII

"The Merchant of Venice" was produced the next night. It was a night attended with much disaster, for by some unheard of oversight Childslea's costumes, with the exception of the one he wore in the first act, were forgotten where they had been left down town to be cleaned.

His valet, a patient, elderly man, not over strong, had been seized with a hemorrhage just before leaving for the theater that evening. Not until he had reached Childslea's dressing-room, and the curtain had been rung up, did his sufferings permit him to remember that Shylock's three gowns were not where they should be. It was too late then to even think of sending for them, so great was the distance from the theater.

The luckless valet had not the courage to make known his remissness to Childslea direct. Instead, he sought Mr. White and told him the state of affairs. And just at that moment Childslea came out of his dressing-room and saw the two men in conversation. Striding up to them he demanded to know what it was about. With proper appreciation of the situation Mr. White told him while the hapless valet nervously twisted the little old cap he held and gradually edged nearer and nearer the door.

Childslea didn't wait to hear the end of it all. He understood his costumes were not in the theater, that they could not possibly be gotten in time for him to wear them in the different acts, that—most awful of all—the robe he had on for a street scene was to do service through the play and dwarf his triumph in the court scene. Raising the staff he used as Shylock he brandished it above the head of the cowering valet.

"You good-for-nothing blackguard! I've endured you long enough. Take your miserable body out of my sight.

Never enter this place again. You are discharged for good."

He ran him out of the theater, following him to the door and shaking his stick at him. Then he returned to his dressing-room, striking and swearing at whoever stood in his way. A fat scene shifter was carrying a stage door to place against a raft of other scenery across the stage. He was unfortunate enough to touch Childslea's sacred body with an edge of it. The actor turned on him like an enraged bull.

"You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you, you infernal idiot?" he roared in a suppressed voice, not forgetting his packed house in front; "you're all conspiring against me."

Whack! whack! came down the stick with vicious force, missing Pat and descending heavily upon the light framework, for the scene shifter was a wily man, showing considerable dexterity in parrying with his impromptu shield. Across the back of the stage the two went, Pat coquetting with the door to his great advantage, for never a once did the strokes reach him, but spent their force on his armor.

Furious at the smothered giggles he heard, and knowing full well they were provoked by his inability to find any telling spot, Childslea cornered Pat, and getting him quite at his mercy, beat him severely about the head and broad of his back. No one dared to interfere, and things were looking pretty serious for the poor fellow, who could no longer shield himself.

Then Temple came hurriedly in from one of the boxes, having been sent for by the judicious stage manager. He laid his hand on Childslea's wrist and spoke to him under his breath. The actor emitted a couple of oaths, shook off Temple's hand with much the same manner that a maddened bull throws back his mane from his eyes and, as Tommy's unmoved voice said, "Your cue, Mr. Childslea," made a stride forward, entered the stage, and spoke his first lines amid the applause of the magnificent greeting accorded him.

Lal had been a dumfounded spectator of the whole

scene. She stood near the foot of the stairs leading up to the flies, with Madam Joseph, who had come down a moment for a sustaining drink of brandy the doorkeeper kept on call for her.

"Was there ever anything so disgraceful?" murmured the girl, as Childslea's catlike body disappeared upon the stage, "and his poor valet!"

"Oh! Moses me, dearie, dis is nuddings," sighed Madam Joseph, shaking her head; "you have not seen him when he is real goot and mad. But I wouldn't be his walet. No. Not for no money."

"I wouldn't mind being his wallet," said Ned Chevalier who had joined them; "but valet, or no valet, if he attempted to strike me I'd strike back. I'll endure his curses and epithets, but no man raises his hand against me without my hitting back."

"What? Not if he meant a raise?" ejaculated Beresford, pausing on his way a moment to wait his cues from the wings; "why, Pat'll be the richer to-morrow morning by twenty-five dollars, and as for Martin, it isn't his first discharge. He'll be back with a raise of ten per extra a week."

"Hush—sh, less talking," said Mr. White coming up to them on his tiptoes; "he has heard your voices. Scatter, or I won't answer for your heads when he comes off."

Madam Joseph disappeared downstairs, Chevalier gently maneuvered to another stand, while Beresford led Lal to a screened position. She was looking very sweet in a court dress, as she was lady-in-waiting to Portia to-night. Her hair was piled high, shining like burnt taffy under the lime lights.

"You look like an angel," whispered Beresford, his dark eyes resting upon her ardently; "it is all I can do to keep my hands off you."

"I don't think angels are given to wearing clothes like these," she returned; "after all, clothes are responsible for many a complimentary speech."

"*You know* I never give you compliments. You'd look

sweet in a rag. You wear your hair hanging in the new play, don't you? Thank God for that."

"How irreverent you are! Is it necessary to allude to God so much in that light way?"

"Is it light?"

"You know it is."

"Oh! well—I never stopped to consider. Child, you take things too seriously. Life's so short. That's trite, but true. Don't think of things too much. If you do, you'll be eternally miserable. Listen to me sermonize. And you let me drift off from the subject of your hair. Come, don't you see the beauty of it yourself?"

"I never see it unless I look in the glass."

"Which is seldom enough, I know, you child without vanity. But haven't you ever been told how beautiful it is?"

"Oh! yes," she answered honestly.

"Oh, you have? By whom? Did any man ever tell you?" and Beresford's voice contained a sharp ring.

"Yes. Men have admired it. One"—Lal's face grew soft, and while her mouth smiled her eyes retained their look of sadness—"there was one whose name for me was Titian Queen."

"Who was it?" quickly. "Anyone here?"

"No, indeed—it was someone home."

"Who was it?" demanded he, unconscious of the peremptory note in his voice.

Lal drew herself up.

"I will not tell you," she said.

"I didn't mean to be so rude. Forgive me. But tell me, won't you?"

"Beresford, your cues—mind them," came from Mr. White in quiet reminder.

"Tell me," he persisted, "who was it? A lover?"

"Go on. It's time," said Lal, with a glance toward the stage.

"Will you tell me?"

"For God's sake, go on, Berry. They're holding the

stage for you," was Ned Chevalier's hurried whisper, as he came off.

"Go—go—" entreated Lal, "Mr. Childslea will—"

"Tell me," and his eyes held her.

"Yes, yes. It was only Howell—Peggy's husband. There—go. Oh—" with a sigh of relief as he stepped through the door and his rich voice could be heard uttering his lines. Lal waited only for that. Then she fled up the stairway.

"Satan's Emissary" and "Baron Paul" were given the following nights. And in addition to the nightly change of bill, there was the work of rehearsing the new play. It was a pretty, rather sentimental thing, and seemed certain to appeal to the popular taste. Beresford had the leading part after Childslea, but Childslea bore the brunt of the play, as usual.

At the fag end of the season before, the play had had a few trial presentations out of town, so the first night in New York was taken more calmly than it would have been had it been otherwise. Personal electricity was much less felt in the atmosphere. There was excitement, but it was quieter than heretofore. The out-of-town verdict of the play had been good, though this fact rarely augurs well for the stamp of New York's approval. Still the hopes of the company ran high, and many a jest and laugh were exchanged through the doors of dressing-rooms that night while the overture was being played.

Miss Nash was very much in evidence in this piece. There were only two lines in her part, but she played the accompaniment on the stage to Childslea's song and the music for the Christmas dance; also the organ in the cathedral scene. Then, in the prettiest scene in the play, when Childslea as the renunciatory hero almost betrays his love for the heroine, Miss Nash at the piano in the wings played some gentle melody to lend the proper effect.

Lal's part was much more pretentious than in the other

plays wherein she had figured, though she was really not often upon the stage. It was a vivacious role with a touch of mock sentiment which she carried off with good effect, provoking the laughter of her more severe critics behind the scenes who were watching her keenly. To arouse a fellow actor's admiration is a great deal. Usually each one is too wrapt in himself to notice another's art.

Mr. White nodded approvingly when, after making a laughing exit to the murmurs of approbation in the house, she passed him swiftly on her way to her dressing-room.

"You're on the right road," he called in a whisper up the stairs after her; "that was a good exit."

Pleased enough at her little triumph, and appreciating deeply such words of encouragement, she ran light-heartedly up the remaining flights. But on the third round she paused for breath before resuming her climb. Her face was flushed through the little rouge she wore. Her own color was high at times and she needed very little artificial means to give the appearance of youth.

Her masses of hair in all their coppery beauty hung in prodigal splendor around her. A bit of blue ribbon was caught in among the strands. Her eyes were alight with something other than pleasure at what she felt she could look upon as her first real progressive step. Her color came and went quickly under her rouge.

Ahead of her was Beresford leaning over the railing along the hall looking down onto the stage. He was in his stage clothes, and while the rest of the men wore wigs, he refused, looking his handsomest with his own heavy, waving hair.

She had to pass him to round the corner of the stairs and an instant's thought made her feel she could do this without his knowledge. His back was to her and he seemed absorbed in the scene below. Why she should wish to evade him she could not determine in herself, but something stronger than herself urged her forward.

Her soft shoes made no noise along the passageway; she moved quickly; she had passed the corner without a sound when—

Beresford, like a flash, had turned from the railing, and, springing forward, caught her arm.

"You tease!" he said; "you were going to slip by me and you thought I didn't know it. Did you want to escape my censure for your acting?"

She looked up bewildered.

"Did I do so badly? Mr. White said—"

"Jimmie White isn't an actor. I've been one all my life. And I think—"

He paused, and she said quickly:

"Oh, you don't think it wasn't good at all, do you? You don't think that I—"

"Of course I don't. I was going to tease you a bit, but I haven't the heart now. Listen to me," he said suddenly, with a fierceness of manner she did not understand, "you are clever and I was right. You have it in you. What you did to-night was a capital bit. And you with no training, too! But do you think it's this in you that's driving me out of my senses? It isn't. It's—"

He leaned over toward her.

"White's going to ring down now. I hear him," he said, speaking rapidly, "we both go on in ten minutes. Then we are free till the end of the third act. Change your dress now and after you come off in the next act—are you listening?—join me here again. This window seat—few are here—will you come?"

"Why?" asked Lal, with lowered eyes.

"Why?" he repeated. "Why? I'll tell you then. Will you come? Will you?"

"If you—want me," she said in a low voice.

"If I want you!" he answered, in tense tones. "This is how much I want you, you witch!"

Seizing the clouds of shining hair that floated round her

he bent his head and passionately pressed his lips among the meshes.

"Oh, don't!" she remonstrated, drawing back.

"Go—go, before I forget myself."

She was gone from him like a bird then, leaving him with his head bowed a little. She remembered his attitude long afterward when he told her of what he had been thinking.

They were on the stage together in the next act, but she did not look at him once. They were required to shake hands as Beresford made his exit, and in doing so he said under his breath:

"The window seat. Your promise."

The touch of his hand had sent a glow over her, her senses reeled and she moved as if she saw things vaguely. How she got through her lines she did not know, but she fought against this new emotion which seemed to be taking complete control of her, and delivered them, receiving nothing worse than a glare from Childslea as she made her exit.

It needed but a few minutes for the ringing down of the curtain. She knew Beresford had gone to the window seat and was awaiting her. But a spirit of obstinacy pervaded her. She felt she could not mount the stairs.

But as the signal came for the lowering of the curtain, some unfortunate tripped over a bit of carpeting and fell headlong into a great boxful of helmets, swords and armors which, by some inadvertence, had been left against the wall since the night before, when they had been used in "Richard." The noise was frightful, as the man fell clattering among the metal; and Lal, knowing full well the consequences, turned and fled up the stairs, her one idea being to get away from the scene of Childslea's wrath.

Beresford met her as she paused, panting, at the second flight.

"What on earth's that racket? Childslea'll raise the dev—the roof off our heads."

She told him what had occurred and they both hurried

to the railing, where they leaned over to watch what happended below.

But the man had extricated himself from his position and was just disappearing through the stage door as the curtain went down and Childslea came off to storm, and curse, to rail and to damn. Not finding the delinquent, he turned furiously to Mr. White and vented his expletives upon his favorite subject.

"It isn't pleasant to hear," said Beresford; "come away."

"He is going to his dressing-room now. Poor Mr. White. I wonder he doesn't turn some day."

"He will. There'll be a grand time then and Jimmie'll come out victor, having either mopped the floor with him or won a higher salary. But I want to talk to you."

"I want to see them set this scene. It's new to me, you know."

He leaned silently by her side then, watching her in the deeply penetrating way he had. But her interest was absorbed in what lay before her below. Tommy's call echoed up the stairs, many passed them swiftly on their way down, Mr. White's bell gave out its long ring and the third act was on.

"It's a pretty play," said Lal as she looked down upon the lighted stage; "one to appeal to young girls."

"Yes."

"And there are genuinely artistic bits here and there."

"I suppose so. Do you think I care about this play?"

"You ought to."

He leaned near her.

"How long are you going to torture me?" he asked.

"Torture you?" she repeated, turning to look at him, but as she did so her eyes fell beneath his glance.

"It is not like yourself, but it's the woman in you, to pretend not to understand. Why can't you look at me? Why do you always let your eyes fall?"

"Why do you ask me such things?" she replied, turning away.

"*Just to hear* your answer. Don't you suppose I know the

reason? But I love to ask you things your maidenliness won't let you answer. For your eyes are sweet and your manner has the freshness of the pure air still clinging to it."

They had moved, unconsciously almost, to the window seat and Beresford stood beside her looking down upon her as the light above them streamed upon her head, giving to her hair the effect of an aureole.

"Do you know why I asked you to come to this place to-night?" he asked, in still lower tones than he had used.

"For some very good reason I hope."

There was just a suspicion of coquetry in her voice.

It seemed to madden him, for he caught her underneath the chin with a firm hand and commanded her eyes with his.

"For the best reason in the world. Yes, you've got to listen to me. You have a way of just slipping away from me every time. But now you can't. Do you know that there's a perfect fire running through my veins? Do you know that I can't touch you, look at you even, without feeling I'd give ten years of my life to crush your life out with kisses?"

"To how many others have you told this?" she queried, meeting his eyes.

He made a gesture of impatience.

"There have been many women in my life. I have loved once, yes, a hundred times. But not one of them did I love like this—not like this. You stand alone. I am thirty-eight, child, but to-night I feel like a lad with his first happiness. Do you remember that night of the ball? When I first saw you I felt you were my mate. Do you believe that?"

"Yes, I—I—"

The color leaping to her face told Beresford all that he was waiting to hear.

"You darling!" he said with both her hands in his; "you felt the same way, too. I knew it. You love me, little girl? You will be my own, my wife, Lal?"

"Stop—stop," she said suddenly, rising from the window seat, "what is that?"

She inclined her ear toward the stage.

From the wings downstairs came the sweet, sad tones of mournful melody like the lament of a human voice, played as it was by the artiste hand that touched the notes.

"What is what?" Beresford demanded in quick surprise.

"That music. Why, what is it? I—"

"It's only Miss Nash playing. It's 'Father's' scene with Miss Vincent, don't you know? It's a pretty thing, but you can hear it to-morrow, Lal. Look at me, dear, and tell me you're going to be mine."

A paleness had spread over her face. Beresford, watching her keenly, noticed it.

"Why, what is it—you impressionable child. Does music always affect you like this?"

"What is that she's playing?" Lal asked with palpable effort, and she leaned a moment on his arm; "I know it—I can't recall the name. Will you tell me?"

"Why, it's the Sonata—Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. We haven't had it at rehearsals, but didn't you know we were to have it played during—"

"No, I didn't. Let me think a moment, please."

Wondering, he led her to the window seat and stood before her, looking at her with questioning eyes.

Lal's mind was in a whirl.

The Sonata! How many weeks ago in the past that seemed like a dream, so far had she put it behind her, had she and Peggy and Howell taken that never to be forgotten sail to Thor's Island? And the palmist? No, not the palmist. The daughter, the one who had boasted second sight. What had she told her? What, but that the Sonata would be the key note of her life? And what else? What else?

She gazed up at Beresford as he stood before her in all his superb manliness, her eyes seeing him dimly. But not dimly now returned the words to her ear, "You will hear the Sonata played again away from here, ... and *wherever you hear the Moonlight Sonata then, beware of the circumstances attending it.*"

"Beware of the circumstances!" What were they? The

theater? No, a hundred times no! Its influence could not harm her. Pshaw! that was too broad a limit. What were the circumstances attending this first hearing of this music that was penetrating her very soul?

She looked again at Beresford.

He had told her his love, had asked her to be his wife; could harm come from this? Then every girl who married was harmed. But when two people loved as he and—

A burning flush covered her face and her knees trembled. Away with such superstition. What rank absurdity! Would she allow an ignorant woman's silly prophecy to wreck her life's happiness?

Beresford loved her, and she?

With a little gasp she put out her hand.

"It was the music. But I have forgotten everything since."

But his arms had swiftly drawn her up to himself, and the rest of her words were finished with his lips upon her own.

Still the moaning bars of the Sonata floated up from below, and a tremor seized the girl.

Was the woman right after all? Should she beware of the circumstances?

CHAPTER IX

The engagement in New York closed after a prosperous six weeks of it and then began the wretchedness of the road.

Lal's love of experience soon had a heavy surfeit. Had it not been for Beresford's devotion she would have fared badly, left to herself. She, who knew absolutely nothing of the practical side of life, would have been in a quandary indeed, many a time, had not Beresford's knowledge of everything been at her call hourly, helping her over the

difficulties of baggage checks and room renting, time tables and road rules.

It was Beresford who shielded her from every possible discomfort. It was he who guarded her from the mean envy of the women and the many disagreeable encounters that would have been hers had she been left to her own resources.

It was a matter of much comment in the company that Beresford and Lal were so often together. Neither had mentioned their engagement to anyone. Beresford, through the carelessness characteristic of him; Lal, through shyness of her own happiness. The worst possible construction was placed upon the fact of their constantly being together. Allusions to this by anyone were carefully refrained from, for however one might joke about the improprieties of the other members of the company, it was dangerous to jest about Beresford. And, too, there was quite a well-defined feeling that it would be considerably worse for the jester in this particular case. It was realized that Lal was different from the others.

Not until the tour began were the girl's eyes opened to many things. The heretofore mildly sedate company, as soon as New York was left behind, flung all decorum to the winds. They seemed to have been held in check by the metropolis, but once free from wives and husbands, home influence and ultra-civilization, the Bohemian life born of close companionship and familiarity began.

Childslea traveled in his private car, the rest of the company with whatever accommodations they could get. The business manager of the company that year was a Jew, and drove bitterly close bargains. Sometimes part of the company got sleepers and some did not. The men occasionally gave up their places to the women at these times, but with only two or three exceptions was this done without grumbling and swearing.

Once in a while Childslea would invite all the women into his car for dinner or luncheon, while of the men Beresford was the only one favored.

It gave Lal a shock at first to see how careless the women were in their speech and manner before the actors while traveling. In New York their tongues had been kept in leash. Now, while en route, they appeared in frank deshabille, with loose wrappers, hair hanging, unminced talk and free recurrence to drinks of every description.

It was astonishing how a whisky toddy served as a panacea for every ill, mental or physical. Lal could not complain of cold, a headache, an attack of "blues," without a suggestion from every quarter to try a brandy lemonade, a silver gin fizz, a hot toddy. Even Miss Vincent and Miss Roland, whom she had thought the most refined of the women, and quite a little different from actresses in general, were constantly having recourse to strengtheners.

Lal invariably refused to touch wines or liquors of any kind, and was laughed at for it. She knew something of medicine, and before leaving New York had bought a small case which she had stocked with valuable medicines, laying in a large supply of quinine. Her readiness to administer to the wants of the company won for her the appellation of "Doctor," but her help was rarely accepted, the preference being for whisky sodas.

The first stop was at Philadelphia, and everyone had reason to remember the third night of that engagement. They played there a piece in which Childslea's elaborate toilet was as much a feature as anything on the program. Martin, his valet, who had been reinstated, while dressing his master unfortunately broke a fancy button on the coat Childslea wore in an important scene. It was in a conspicuous place and could not be replaced immediately.

Finnicky to a degree about his personal attire at all times, on the stage or off, it was quite enough to arouse the devil in Childslea. For three minutes or so he contented himself by hurling every conceivable epithet in his vocabulary at the man. But the valet, standing abjectly there, with no word of remonstrance when he was styled dog, devil, idiot, ass and a host of similar terms of endearment, enraged Childslea beyond bounds.

He sprang at the man, choked him, flung him to the floor and beat him till he was blue in the face, yelled for Mr. White and, issuing orders to remove the "carcass," made his entrance upon the stage with all the polished courtliness that was his when he chose to exercise it.

But his fit of frantic rage cost him a little more than usual in this case. Aside from having been knocked senseless the man's hearing was gone forever. He was removed to the hospital, Childslea paying all the expenses incurred, which was little enough to do. A warrant was sworn out for the actor's arrest, and he was arraigned before a Philadelphia justice. Mr. Temple gave heavy bail, and at the end of the week the company was on its way to the next city in the route.

The matter was eventually hushed up, and though the newspapers got an inkling and aired what they knew thoroughly, the inside facts were not discovered. And so passed another of the times when the actor escaped the punishment of his many transgressions against the law.

At Chicago Miss Vincent was discharged. Childslea objected to some pretty ruffles she wore about her neck in "Satan's Emissary" for no apparent reason but that they annoyed him when it was necessary for him to embrace her. A new leading woman was engaged, Miss Richards by name. The positions of everyone in the company were in jeopardy daily. It was as easy for Childslea to discharge some one as to breathe.

The Pacific Coast States were included early in the tour. A week in San Francisco and one in Portland, Oregon, were scheduled. When the latter city was reached the company found their afternoons free from rehearsal for the first time since they had left New York.

Beresford was in one of his happiest moods when they left the train, and he had secured a room for Lal in a modest house near the theater.

"I'll be back in an hour, my darling," he said when he had concluded arrangements for her week's stay; "I'm go-

ing to get a horse and buggy and take you for a drive on the beautiful country roads this city's so proud of."

At the time specified he returned to find her waiting him in the pretty gray traveling suit she knew he loved to see her in.

But it was not until they had put the city behind them, and were in the semi-seclusion of the road leading from South Portland along in the shadow of the Willamette, that Beresford threw propriety to the winds and turned to his companion with his face expressing what his will had controlled when they had been bounded by city streets.

"Thank God we can forget for a while at least that there is such a thing as a theater," he said, as he drew her to him a moment to press his lips to her hair.

It was one of the mildest of days, late as it was in October, and as soon as they had reached the outskirts of the city Beresford had removed Lal's soft Fedora to feast his eyes on the massy richness of the great knot coiled low in her neck.

"You're as unlike the women I've known as pearls are unlike Portuguese. I thought you'd never let me woo you. As for winning you, I haven't done that yet, have I? When are you going to give yourself to me, Lal?"

"Why, our courtship has only just begun," she answered, with the look of surprise in her eyes which invariably led him to bend forward to caress her.

"Three weeks now since I first told you I loved you. Does it seem longer?"

"Oh, no, indeed. But it seems as if I have loved you forever, Yale."

He laughed his pleasant laugh at her ingenuousness.

"Little darling! The way we feel toward each other makes it seem almost as if we believe in Theosophy. But we don't. We believe only in to-day, in the love that courses through our veins, in the life that we feel leaping within us, in the joyful present, glad of the forgotten past, with no worrying thought of the uncertain future. Eh, little girl?"

"I can't forget the past," said Lal, with a distant look in her eyes.

"Why not? What good to remember it? It's gone."

"From our vision of now—yes. But we haven't put it behind us forever. We reckon with it later."

Beresford looked away over the stretch of water to their left for a few minutes.

"Do you believe that?" he asked.

"Certainly. Don't you?"

"No. I can't. But, my God, if you believe in it it must be true. I would stake my life on your faith. But as to the future, child, it is so misty—"

"How can you think so? We are certain we go right on living when we die."

"I'm not so sure."

"You are living while you sleep, aren't you?"

"Of course. But that isn't the same thing."

"Oh! yes. Death is only a conscious sleep till the end of all things here. I believe in a Heaven that realizes our highest mental aspirations as well as our spiritual. It is strange," she continued musingly, "but we are composed, after all, of three forces, and great ones too. The body, which is of the earth entirely, the soul which is of Heaven alone, and the mind which belongs to both—which is equally a part of each. Our mind dominates our body here. Will it take precedence of the spirit in the next world?"

"Come, come, you're going to get into deep waters presently, my darling. And then you would call to me for help. And while I am sure I could lift you out of every trouble physically, I'm not so sure of the other. You think too much, Lal. Glorious days like this to-day weren't made for somber thoughts. They were made for humanity to enjoy. And that reminds me. We're jogging along here like Darby and Joan. We are young; this is the fall of the year, when everything should go with a whip and a dash, not like the lazy, languorous spring. Let's see if we can't get some animation into this animal."

He snapped the long lash whip and curled it round the horse's girth with a sudden spurt that sent the beast forward at a good gait. A few sedate barnyard fowl scuttled to get out of the way. Beresford let them pass. He had his eye on a plump, young rooster that was strutting along the side of the road.

With a long sweep of the unerring arm the lash had whistled through the air, coiled many times around luckless cockalorum's legs and Beresford with a nonchalance that suggested he was not unaccustomed to winning land prizes in such fashion, threw the reins to Lal as, smothering chanticleer's squawks of impotent rage, he proceeded to disentangle the whip from the closely bound feet.

Detaching his key ring from its chain he snapped it round the sprawling yellow claws instead. Then with a laugh he tossed the fowl under the seat.

"We'll have it cooked to-night in true Western style, and eat it as a souvenir of this ride together. Now to allay your charge of petty larceny that I see speaking in your eyes, child of truth, we'll settle with the old lady yonder. She runs the farm I'll wager."

He drew rein at the side of the fence and raised his hat with the grace he only knew how to assume. The portly dame in gingham sunbonnet, pausing on her way to the kitchen door, regarded him admiringly.

Beresford smiled engagingly.

"I've just 'hooked' a chicken of yours," he said pleasantly, "with my whip. We're strangers and want to sample Western stock. Will a dollar cover the theft as well as the chicken? Ah? Well, then, we're both satisfied."

He spun a silver dollar through the air with a movement that suggested sleight of hand. It landed directly at the old woman's feet and left her staring, open mouthed, as with a flourish he flicked the horse and the two went spinning down the road again.

"Your audacity is boundless," said Lal, with a laugh, catching her breath and putting on her hat.

"Is it? And your witchery is endless. Laugh like that again, will you? Don't put on your hat, dear. Let me pull your hair down and throw the hairpins away. You darling, kiss me."

"Yale!" she remonstrated, "this is a country road, but we're not free from observation. I'll get out of the carriage if you don't behave yourself."

"Well—you've got the upper hand now, haven't you?" He looked at her to send the laugh in his eyes to her own. "Wait till you're mine, though. I'm going to be a frightful tyrant. Every time I want to kiss you I shall, no matter where we are or who's looking."

"Do you think I will allow you to run the risk of letting people laugh at you?" she asked with a smile.

"What? For kissing you? Do you think I care? You'll be mine. I can laugh at them, their envy will be so palpable."

"Oh, Yale, you are so extravagant."

"This isn't a circumstance to what I'll be when you're all my own. When are you going to marry me, darling?"

"Oh, not yet awhile. We're so very happy now."

"Afraid to break the surety for a possible risk, eh? But things can't go on indefinitely, Lal. I want you. Let's get married to-night," he said suddenly.

"Why Yale, what earthly reason can you find for such a thing?"

"What earthly reason why we shouldn't?"

He was looking ahead of him and Lal saw an incipient frown move his brows as he spoke.

She mistook the cause and said with one of her expressive gestures:

"I think it would be pleasant drifting along, loving each other as we do now. Suppose—suppose we wait until I am famous."

She looked up at him in the provokingly arch way she had. He made a quick movement toward her.

"As if you thought I would fall in with such a plan!"

His eyes laughed down into hers. "Till you are famous? Do you want me to wait forever?"

Although she knew he was joking, a look of fear entered her eyes.

"You don't think I'll miss it, do you?" she queried; "I've sometimes wondered—"

"Miss it? No, it's sure to evidence itself. It's in you. But suppose I check it? What then? I won't want you to give a tenth of your time to even so cold a thing as art. Art! Bah! We men find precious little in the profession. It's women and wine with most of us. It is you women who search for art and find it and beautify it and exploit it —when we men don't interfere and change your purpose to our purpose."

She listened to him, making no comment. He continued:

"I don't think I'm a jealous man, perhaps because I've never been sufficiently in love with a woman. But I love you—God! but I love you, Lal, and I want you all myself. I wouldn't think of telling you to give up the profession after we are married, but I'd love you so you'd throw it aside to spend the sweetness of your nature entirely upon me. Such is the force of love. It's ahead of ambition every time in a woman—except those few who are dead to all womanhood, who are despairing and live only to please others. I feel this way—that I would give all I possess to cut the whole thing and live only for you. But—" he shrugged his shoulders, "there's the matter of fact side bobbing up. We must live and I must support us both. You won't have to work when you marry me. You will of course be stubborn at first and keep pace with art, won't you? Oh, I know that mutinous mouth—"

"I certainly wouldn't give up this chance of progression in the drama," she answered him.

"Until love conquers and sends you to my arms," he said; "then I'll defy you to get away."

CHAPTER X

As the days passed and the company flitted from city to city, Lal saw more closely into things, and was ashamed of men and women. She learned only too soon the indecent state of affairs existing in the company. She shuddered as she thought that a Turkish harem was lawful in comparison to the flagrant disregard of morals exhibited by Childslea's company.

She grew colder and more distant in her manner to every one, particularly the women, for she argued that women, having more restraint upon themselves, could keep their purity unspotted if they chose. It horrified her and filled her with unutterable loathing when she learned that the majority of the women's relations with the men were chiefly mercenary.

And though Mrs. Childslea had traveled with her husband from city to city he had not been able to keep his abominable passions in check. Many were the violent outbreaks between the two, Mrs. Childslea supplicating, pleading; her husband stormy, conciliatory by turns. Those of the company staying at the same hotel heard the wretched discussions. The men found in it spice and amusement; the women satisfaction that the man who tyrannized over them could and should be worried and harried by the little woman whose position as his wife was both her torment and her happiness.

In one instance Lal found her indignation subordinate to her pity. Bertha Baker, a pretty little thing, whose purity was undoubted when the company left New York, had fallen a victim to Charlie Burton's smooth speech. That she was deeply in love with him was apparent. Knowledge of right and wrong she had, but she trusted as many a

woman has done before her, and her ruin was accomplished.

It was soon green-room gossip, eliciting contemptuous pity from the women, no better than herself, if as good, but whose long walks in crooked paths had taught them cleverness in concealment. The men looked upon the knowledge as license for any speech or action in Miss Baker's presence. Perhaps they were right in their view of the matter. But even a fallen woman does not lose all her virtue. She is still a woman. She still can feel an outrage to her sex.

When Lal learned of the affair through Madam Joseph, whose stern contempt of actors often found vent in a sweeping denunciation of the whole profession, she felt she could not rest until she had denounced Burton to the entire company. But she did nothing of the kind. Cold reason came to her heart—impetuosity. It made her realize the utter folly of such a procedure. People in glass houses couldn't throw stones. She would be laughed at, she saw that. The case was no more terrible than hundreds of others occurring daily. Only it seemed so because right within her own observation.

Sheer pity prompted her to nod kindly to the wretched girl, more particularly as Miss Baker kept to herself now that Burton had cast her aside with the indifference he bestowed upon his soiled gloves. Lal was genuinely touched by the girl's misery, and offered her what sympathy she could, coming to the rescue with her medicine case when a heavy cold seized Miss Baker, and administering to her comfort in many little ways.

Beresford watched her musingly the first time he saw Lal talking to Miss Baker. The second time he spoke to her. It was one Sunday in November when the company was making its skip from St. Louis to Chicago for a return engagement.

Lal was on her way to the water cooler for water in which to prepare some medicine for her patient, whom bronchitis had attacked recently.

"This is charitable work, Lal, but I wish you would see

and speak less to Bertha Baker," said Beresford, bending over her.

"Why?" and Lal's clear eyes met his own.

"Well—her reputation, you know. She—"

"People's reputation can't hurt one."

"Yes it can. You are judged accordingly if you're seen with them. I wouldn't—I know you. But others— "

"The others I don't care about."

"I know, dear, but to please me. Don't be seen so much with the girl. It's awfully sweet of you, and I know your motive. But others won't and well—you'll have me breaking heads because some one is talking against you."

"Let them talk. And I wouldn't have you break one head on my account. But if you are desirous of inflicting punishment somewhere, it would be well deserved if you horsewhipped every man in the company."

"For what?" asked Beresford, aghast.

"For what?" repeated Lal, with a glance of unmistakable scorn at the group of men at the end of the car laughing and joking loudly with the women; "can you look at the women in the company and ask me for what?"

"Oh, I know we men are all cads, but it is something bound to exist till the end of time. You will have your way I suppose, but why do you make such discrimination? You're kind to Bertha and you don't tolerate the others."

"Are you really as unpenetrating as you seem? This poor girl fell through love. The others—"

She gave a shudder of disgust.

Beresford stared at her.

"But the offense is the same, Lal," he said.

"Yes, I know. But don't you suppose circumstances are sometimes palliation?"

He raised his brows.

"I doubt it. A spade is a spade. The world doesn't split hairs."

She turned on him, white with indignation.

"The world! What do I care for the world? In mat-

ters like this the pity of one's heart should be the judge, not the coldness of the brain. What are the laws of the world compared with the impulsive, throbbing dictations of the individuals? What if I am called every name in the catalogue for associating with this poor girl? Do you think I care? I, myself, know that I have retained my womanhood."

"But I care, Lal. If anyone dared—"

"That is but natural," she said with a faint smile; "we spring to defend others when calumny comes—at least the great-hearted ones do. For ourselves—what does it matter?"

Beresford sat down beside her on the seat she had just taken. She was looking sadly out of the window.

"I am sure of you, dear," he said, "though there is an old saying, 'You can't touch pitch and remain undefiled.' But —"

"Such a trite, untrue thing as so many of those old saws are," she answered, turning to him; "suppose it were necessary to come in contact with pitch; suppose you couldn't avoid it. If you had covered your hands with a preparation of vaseline, would the pitch adhere? I guess not. So if you are to come in contact with sin prepare yourself in advance with your will and purity. The pitch of sin cannot reach you. It slides away every time when confronted by your armament."

"I can't agree with you. You look at things differently from most people. But I can and will keep people from saying things about you. I've heard nothing yet, but if your good name should be imperiled—"

He rose and steadied her down the aisle to where Miss Baker sat coughing. He saw Lal give her some medicine, arrange the coat at her head, which was doing duty as an improvised pillow, and then turning to a magazine she went on with the article which she had been reading aloud.

The train stopped for half an hour at Springfield, and Beresford seized the opportunity to make his peace with

Lal. He despatched a boy to a florist, and just before the train pulled out a puffy looking little man tore into the station and a great box of roses had exchanged hands.

Beresford bore them to Lal, and, bending low, tendered them with a gallant speech. She smiled at the absurd manner he assumed, but thanked him prettily. He seized her hands and under the grateful covering of the deepening twilight of the November afternoon covered them with kisses.

Just as the colored porter came through the car to light the lamps Childslea sent in an invitation for the entire company to dine with him in his car. This was responded to with alacrity by all save Lal. She disliked the free speech, the veiled meanings, the unchecked laughter. But she had never refused, for to needlessly offend Childslea was not pleasant. One was sure of his displeasure anyway without courting it.

So they all trooped in, Miss Baker among them, her usually subdued manner now quite noticeably enlivened. The cause lay in the fact that Burton had turned the light of his countenance upon her and deigned to notice her again.

Childslea with his players was quite a different Childslea to the one who entertained people from the best social ranks of New York's populace. His ordinary side, in the moral sense of the word, and he was extraordinary in this as he was in every other way, showed uppermost at these private car revels. Though Mrs. Childslea was present, it made no difference. She was forced to hear the risqué stories and tolerate her husband's disgraceful conduct toward the women as indifferently as she could.

There was no lack of wine to lubricate the tongues of the company assembled at the long table spread in the center of the car. Childslea's generosity partook of the nature of extravagance, and he never counted the cost of anything. The champagne soon loosened the wits and warmed the spirits of the party. The talk and laughter grew livelier.

Lal ate her dinner quietly save for an occasional remark to Mr. Williams at her left, or Mr. Tanner at her right.

Beresford sat at Childslea's right chatting with Mrs. Childslea. His glance, however, never left Lal's face, and he sidetracked many an embryonic questionable story from the men.

Miss Nash was not to be repressed, however.

"Such a story as I heard last night before we left," she said, ogling Childslea with her brown eyes over her wineglass; "a young fellow, a friend of mine from the South, brought me to the train. He had been visiting his married sister. They were at dinner, you know, and his little niece had finished and sat on a couch. She was struggling over a multiplication example and having dreadful work of it. She suddenly burst into tears and almost screamed, 'I wish I was a rabbit, I do.'

" 'Why, you absurd child!' said her mother, 'what makes you wish such a thing as that?' And the child replied—imagine—'Because they multiply so fast.' "

A shout greeted this choice bit, and some one yelled "Encore."

But Miss Nash deferred to Childslea whose lips were twitching with the anticipated relish of the story he was about to tell himself. Then Beresford had a violent fit of coughing, declaring he had swallowed a fish bone, and for several minutes thoroughly alarmed his compeers. When he had regained his composure the conversation had been turned to the tragic deaths resultant from such accidents.

"Oh, by the bye, Mr. Childslea," said Burton, who acted in the capacity of private secretary to Childslea on the road, "this letter came for you last night. It's quite a joke. It speaks so well for us all, you know."

He passed the letter down the length of the table and Childslea put on his eyeglasses to read it. It was brief, evidently, for he gave his short, dry "Hah!" of a laugh, and looking up, said:

"Listen. This man knows whereof he writes—oom. St. Louis' brilliant intelligence scintillates from this man's intellect."

Then he read:

"St. Louis, Mo., November 29.

"ROBERT CHILDSLEA:

"I saw you play Friday night in the outrageous new play of yours. Such mawkish sentimentality. Is this trash 'high art?' I have been swindled, sir, for of all bad plays this one of yours is the worst.

"Disgustedly,

"CHARLES E. HOWE.

"Pretty pleasantry—oom. A choice bit of criticism," murmured Childslea, tearing the letter in two and casting it aside. "Burton, send him $2 when we reach Chicago. It will pay for his seat—oom."

"Why, we played to $16,000 last week," said Temple; "is the man a lunatic? And the general criticism was that it is the prettiest play of the season."

"All but the asses. Their criticism is like the law of the Medes and Persians: it changeth nor it altereth not—oom."

The piano was brought into play after dinner. Childslea was in his ferociously humorous mood. His playfulness, as he passed among the women, pinching their arms, was like the gamboling of a tiger in the bosom of his family, ever alert for some chance to show its teeth.

The women, with flattering cajolery, petted and praised him as, sitting at the piano, he imitated various musical instruments, the principal inmates of a barnyard, and the chorus of an opera. From a high falsetto he dropped to the richest bass. From the clear treble of a boy's soprano he dashed into the ringing baritone of "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes." His hands ran up and down the piano with the skill of a professional player; then he imitated on the banjo the sustained notes of an organ, and brought out almost the perfect intonation of a Hebrew's speech.

"Hah! it is mere child's play, you gaping crowd of mummers," he said, with a complimentary wave of his hand which included everybody; "anybody could do what I do—if he had the push and brains—oom."

He caught Lal's transfixed gaze upon him.

"What is the child staring at?" he said in his sharp, dotted speech; "you have not grown accustomed to me yet—oom. That will come. How like rhinestones women of your type are—oom."

"What do you mean, Mr. Childslea?" asked Beresford quickly.

The look in his eyes was not good to see. Childslea was the worst of cowards. He had reason to fear at all times, so many hated him. So now he withdrew a step.

"Rhinestones are brilliant—flashing. The inference is obvious, Beresford. Hah! what's the matter with your brains, my boy? Give us a negro melody. You know how to play them—oom."

Mollified, Beresford took his seat at the piano and played a melody that was very popular then. It was different from most negro songs in that the refrain was of dragging sweetness that penetrated fairly through one.

It was one Lal loved, and as the voices rose and fell in beautiful harmony she was inexpressibly moved. She forgot her companions, and saw only Beresford at the piano, his brown eyes seeking hers as he played the slow swing of the accompaniment. The look of love he bent upon her seemed to envelop her like a glory. She closed her eyes, overcome by the fullness of her happiness. The rhythmic music filled her senses.

When Beresford grew tired of playing, Miss Nash took up the melody where he had left off and the men and women, lulled by the dreamy cadences, lounging in picturesque attitudes under the shaded lights with which the car was softly flooded, did not notice the two as they slipped from the others back to the other car.

Outside on the platform, with the darkness as a mantle and only the stars looking on, Beresford drew the girl into his arms a moment, covering her mouth with his own.

"How your eyes told me that you love me, to-night," he said in a low voice; "there—while I was at the piano. Did you know it?

She pressed her lips passionately to his hands that held her own against his breast.

"Know it? I know it every hour of the day. What a terrible power it is! I can't get rid of the strength of it. You're with me everywhere. Oh! but I love you, love you, Yale. Kiss me. There—let me go; it is too much. Come, the others will be here presently."

CHAPTER XI

A snowstorm delayed the train nine hours getting into Chicago. It was 8:45 before the curtain could be rung up on the play. The delayed and dinnerless company that Monday night were uncomfortable enough, but this did not deter Childslea from storming at his usual rate of speed as soon as the theater was reached.

He was in pretty bad form himself and played as he very rarely did—mechanically. He swore at Miss Roland for nothing at all but that she was slightly in his way as he made an entrance in the second act. She suffered it with suppressed fire in her eyes. All through the Christmas scene she was talking under her breath for the edification of her companions. Lal stood near her once, and Miss Roland, with the nonchalance only found in actresses, when it is found, was swearing to herself in perfectly expressionless tones.

"What's she muttering about—oom?" asked Childslea *sotto voce* of Beresford as Williams held the center of the stage with Miss Baker and Lal.

"She's impressed by the acting to-night," said Beresford without a change of countenance. "I heard her remarking how well you do your part always."

"She is an artiste. Speak to White about her salary. Tell that blithering idiot to stop counting the house—oom."

He indicated Burton and moved away.

The Christmas scene was fated to end other than it usually did. Childslea, in hurriedly picking up the property skates he needed when making his exit to the first scene, overturned the lighted tree which stood upon the table. He did not wait to see the mischief he had caused, but made his exit. The mat on the stage caught fire, and had it not been for Beresford's prompt action a panic must have ensued. He stamped the fire out, after which he was accorded a round of applause.

But later, alone upon the stage, when he tried to light the little alcohol lamp and make the room cozy for Childslea's return with the leading woman, it was impossible for him to ignite a match. Match after match he struck, but the obstinacy that possesses inanimate things at critical moments sometimes was now in evidence and yielded not. Childslea, across the stage in the wings with Miss Richards, stamped his foot in anger.

"Why the devil doesn't he light it? He stands there like a doddering fool. He thinks the audience can't see too much of him. Why can't he get off?"

Beresford in desperation had struck the last match on the table (there had been nine of them), and in vain. With his best grace he turned to the audience, and saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, please consider the lamp lighted," made his exit to the roars of laughter in the house.

Going around to the other side of the stage he routed out Tommy from a heap of trunks the little fellow was unpacking for the following night's performance and berated him in no gentle terms for the remissness of leaving but nine matches upon the table. There was really no blame to be attached to Tommy. Nine matches ought to be sufficient to light a small alcohol lamp. But an angry actor is of all men the most unreasonable, and Beresford stood pounding it into Tommy until Childslea having made his exit tore

around to find Beresford and in turn open out his wrath on him.

So it was in no amiable mood that Childslea left the theater that night to preside at the dinner he was to give to a batch of society people, literary men and women, newspaper critics and a few actors of high repute professionally.

But he controlled himself admirably. And why? Well—these men and women were not dependents, his shivering menials who dreaded the very fall of his footsteps. They were not beholden to him for their daily bread. Even though his genius awed them they yet had rights he was bound to respect. As for the others, what were they but a lot of paid grovelers? In Childslea's eyes they were but the scum of the earth on whom it were fit only for him to wipe his femininely small feet.

Beresford and Lal had been favored with an invitation. Neither cared about going, for Lal was weary of the sound of Childslea's voice, and she felt certain his bland suavity at dinner—so different from his manner employed at the theater—would drive her mad. She was sure her indignation would lead her to some extravagant action, ultimately wrecking her hopes. She expressed this fear to Beresford as they whispered in the flies during their "off scene."

"I'll keep you steady," he told her, as they nodded to Mr. White passing them on the way down. "When you feel your blood rising to boiling point take a drink of ice water. We really must go, dear, though I am dead tired at the very thought of it. We can plead fatigue and leave before he begins the story of his early struggles. He always winds up with that, you know."

"Oh, policy! how direfully needful it is at times. And I hate it so. But to offend Childslea means loss of position. We must go and keep up this sham respect. We ought to be grateful, Yale. Anyone else in the company would be insane with delight over the invitation. It would be something to boast of for a lifetime. I can understand how a feeling

of respectability would glimmer a moment in their souls, for, to meet Childslea socially, after having known him professionally, is a revelation."

Beresford laughed.

"At any rate, there are always people to study at his spreads. I don't want to go myself. But I suppose it's wiser."

It was a brilliant gathering of people that assembled in the parlors of the Marmaduke Club that night, after the play, to greet Childslea and his wife. And the courtliness with which the actor received his guests, exchanging pleasantries with the men and tendering finely turned speeches to the women, caused Lal to marvel.

There was that clever litterateur Mark Forbes, whose apish face and ceaseless grin could almost be forgotten when one remembered his contributions to art. He had met Lal at the Childsleas in New York, and now sought her out for "a feast of reason and a flow of soul." Mrs. Foster, whose intellectual impersonation of a pathetic character had made her famous in a night, came in with Methewson, the novelist, who was wintering in Chicago.

Frank Stone, the husband of a famous actress whose greatness shadowed his own triumphs completely, came in quietly, brightening visibly when he saw the proud face of Jean Haines, the famous singer. Then there was Dean, New York's foremost raconteur, whose jovial face was expanding now with the zest of relating one of his clever stories. And little Hartley, editor of Chicago's steadiest newspaper, with Zampalli, the celebrated impresario, and a host of others, all illuminating their special sphere.

Mrs. Foster came up to where Forbes was discussing the ethics of the drama with Lal, and incidentally learning her opinions upon various matters.

"Dr. Dean tells me you did so exceptionally well tonight," she said to Lal, with a nod to Forbes and a smile of much sweetness to Beresford. "What I saw of your acting

in New York promises well. I am thinking of trying Shakespeare next season. That is your province. You'd make a good Ophelia."

"I second that," said Beresford, "and I know whereof I speak. When you're making up your company next season, Mrs. Foster, remember us."

"Ah! but I didn't include you," was the actress' laughing rejoinder. "Shakespeare isn't your forte, my dear Yale. What would the matinee girl do without you if I were cruel enough to conceal your identity in old men's parts? And I'd have to do that, you know."

"Miss North doesn't see the logic of that," remarked Forbes, with a laugh, as he caught Lal's questioning glance.

"That is because Miss North has the good fortune yet to be young," replied the actress with a sigh. To Lal she said: "Mr. Childslea tells me you have never acted before this season. You look like an enthusiastic nature. Is the veil of illusion over all yet?"

"There never was a veil," returned Lal; "though my idea of actors as a class is a good deal more defined now than it was three months ago."

"As a class how do you regard them?" asked Forbes, with interest.

"If I may speak impersonally I would say I think their great faults are mainly egotism and super-sensitiveness, and super-sensitiveness is a more or less direct result of egotism."

"Yes, yes, that's true," said Forbes, as Mrs. Foster nodded approval. "Each one seems to have surrounded himself or herself with a ring similar to one of those surrounding Saturn."

"Yes, and it's well-nigh impossible to penetrate this ring," supplemented Mrs. Foster. "Indeed, if you touch it, you wound their super-sensitiveness."

"But as long as you keep outside this, they are not half bad," said Beresford with a laugh. "Remember, it is more my class than Miss North's or yours, Mrs. Foster, for you two are artistes. I must defend the actors."

"They are vain, of necessity," Lal went on, "don't you think? For the praise and admiration given them so freely by an indiscriminating public. It is this vanity which has bred the egotism. Of course egotism is either resultant or innate, and in this case it is nearly always resultant."

"Where egotism is innate in anybody avoid him, for he is 'impossible,'" murmured Forbes.

"Well, there is this to be said in their defense," said Beresford, "they are not selfish usually—that is, in the lower sense of the word. They are not usually capable of much self-sacrifice; hence in the higher acceptation of the word they are selfish."

"The chief trouble there seems to be," Mrs. Foster said, with a reflective look, "their utter indifference to what goes on outside them, and to anything which does not directly affect them."

"But once you have appeared in their range of sight, provided you do not touch the aforementioned orbit, they are willing to acknowledge you as 'one of them,'" Lal said.

"Especially if your line of business does not conflict with theirs," added Beresford. "A leading man will generally be friendly with a comedian, and a 'heavy' with a 'juvenile,' because there is usually no need of jealousy or apprehension."

"In my observation of them," Forbes said, "I've found them always impulsive and generous, quick to take offense, but quick to forgive except you wound their vanity. If you can steer clear of this I think you will find the actor or actress not such a bad lot."

"Thank you," said Beresford with a bow.

"As a class one can compare them to sailors," was Lal's final opinion; "they are about as improvident."

It was a matter of wonderment to her when she found herself placed at the right of Childslea at the long table. Such a seat of honor she felt should have been accorded to Mrs. Foster or some other woman whose years of work crowned with success was reason enough for the prerogative. But she could not question it and she took her seat, controlling her surprise and not unmindful of the expression

upon Beresford's face. He, too, was in a state of mental interrogation, she saw, but the glance he bent upon Childslea was more than that of inquiry.

It worried her to see the anxious glances of Mrs. Childslea, sitting opposite, cast in her direction. Lal knew Childslea was freakishly fickle and whimsical in his likes and dislikes, and she had hoped she would never be a target for his admiration. Now she wished it more than ever, for she felt genuinely sorry for the little woman who was perpetually kept on the ragged edge of apprehension, dreading a successor in his affections, such as they were, seeing in every woman a possible rival.

She endeavored to allay Mrs. Childslea's fears of jealousy by speaking to her husband only when he addressed her. This soon proved to be most of the time, for the actor devoted his attention to her to the utter exclusion of the lady at his left.

"You did well to-night—oom. You will soon be playing large parts, child," he said, looking at her with his coldly measuring glance.

"Oh, will I?" exclaimed Lal, who could not repress a throb of pleasure at his words, though she resented the appellation he had used. It was so often Beresford's term for her.

But she suppressed any resentment as foolish, as well as certain death to her hopes. She flushed with the ready color of eagerness.

"I am trying very hard to obtain that for which I started out," she said, returning his glance with a look of shyness that misled many, though it was something she could not help.

"Have you made any resolutions?" asked Chlidslea, biting some celery in the quick way he had, even in trifles. "You look like a person who would form resolutions—oom."

"Oh, yes," she laughed; "for if I don't get what I like I am going to try to like what I get."

"Philosophy, thy name is child. How few settle down to that—oom."

Dean here called the length of the table:

"When will you get back to New York, Childslea? You can't imagine how we miss you there."

A keen, indefinable expression crossed Childslea's face, an expression one would expect to find on the face of Sherlock Holmes.

"I am in strong favor in Chicago," he said. "I always meet with good houses and evidences of appreciation. Shall I seem ungrateful, and cross out my road tour so that New Yorkers may bask in the brightness of my art?"

"Joking aside, Childslea, when will you be in New York again?" asked Forbes.

"March next. New York, don't you know, is the Paradise for stars and we all work heavenward—oom."

He turned to Lal again, and the conversation at table continued with the same animation. In manner Childslea was nothing but the well-bred, polished man of the world.

Lal longed to ask him why he had a different code of etiquette for his players, but instead of doing so regarded her salad thoughtfully. She was quite conscious of his steadfast gaze at every moment, but attributed it to the fact that he was probably summing up her 'points' as to some new role he had in mind for her.

She was strengthened in this supposition by his strict adherence to professional chat. Nevertheless it was embarrassing to have one's self looked over so coolly, so critically. Before dinner was half concluded she had forgiven Childslea every insult she had ever seen another suffer at his hands. His amiability to her was so marked that she felt she would be the most ungrateful of ingrates to be unable to overlook his failings. He was evidently interested in her, glad that she appreciated art for art's sake and seemed inclined to help her forward.

Toasts were proposed and healths were drunk. Childslea, called upon for a toast, raised his wine glass aloft, saying with high-bred grace:

"To my wife—not beautiful—but affectionate. What we men desire in women is affection, first and foremost—oom."

Dean called out:

"Another toast to the same fair lady, but I must supply the adjective her husband has left out. To the health of Mrs. Childslea—affectionate, and—beautiful."

Mrs. Childslea's delicate face flushed.

The guests drank the toast, standing.

Childslea refilled his glass.

"Another!" he cried in his clarion tones, "and this to Miss North, the prettiest woman at table to-night, one who is destined to tread the paths carved out by Siddons—oom."

He turned with his fierce smile to Lal.

Mrs. Childslea's face was white again.

"Do not forget Mrs. Foster and our other brilliant friends present, dear," she said in half-lowered tones, as her eyes caught the cloud settling upon the faces of the women at the table.

Childslea's face darkened.

"To Miss North, gentlemen. The only—"

"Rob!" remonstrated his wife.

The blue of the lightning's flash leapt into Childslea's eyes. His wineglass, filled to the brim with his rare Chateau la Rose, trembled an instant in his hand. Only an instant, for with a curse the unbridled passion of the man broke forth and quick as a dart he had flung the contents of the glass into his wife's face.

An ejaculation broke from everyone, though the greater number was held to their seats through sheer dumfoundedness. Two or three of the gentlemen had sprung to their feet. A dreadful silence cast its withering blight upon all. Beresford, nearest his hostess, had sprung to her side and was wiping the ugly stains from the ivory satin of her evening dress as the wine trickled down from her face.

Childslea, with a movement of his hand as if brushing away a web from across his eyes, had reached his wife's side.

"What an unfortunate occurrence! A shocking accident. That will do, Beresford. I can attend to this—oom. Did you get any in your eyes, dear?" he asked his wife.

"It amounts to nothing," was the reply, in the low voice of his wife. "Will you send a call for the carriage? Please make my excuses."

She did not raise her eyes. Lal felt her position as keenly as though it had been her own. Only, she said to herself, she would have known how to have accepted an insult like this. It would have been in no quiet manner. Childslea would have had a different woman with whom to deal.

Mrs. Foster pressed forward.

"Good-night, Mrs. Childslea," she said gently. "It is late and I have to hurry away."

"To-morrow is a busy day with me," Jean Haines averred. "As early as 10 I have a rehearsal, so I must bid you good-night."

One by one they made their adieux.

Beresford returned to Lal with her wraps. His face was white with suppressed passion.

"Say good-night quickly, dear," he whispered, as the rapidly diminishing company passed from the dining-room, "or I won't be responsible for what happens. The cad! I could horsewhip him!"

Not a word did Lal say to Mrs. Childslea. Her heart was full to overflowing for the suffering woman. But the little pressure of the hand meant much, and something else told Mrs. Childslea how little she need fear from a girl whose eyes were as truthful as the ones Lal bent upon her.

Quite extraordinarily enough, the newspapers never got a breath of the scandal to inform a waiting world of this latest outrage Childslea had inflicted upon a defenseless woman.

But Mrs. Childslea went back to New York the next morning.

CHAPTER XII.

A week sped by. The Chicago engagement was an unprecedented one in point of receipts. The fact that the money was rolling in at the box office almost faster than it could be handled did not prove to be soothing to Childslea's ever-bristling nerves. Indeed, it served rather to parade before his company the indisputable fact that he was a host in himself and that minus support, scenery, and the other adjuncts of a star's paraphernalia, people would still crowd the playhouse to the doors to see him.

"Hah! They say a prophet is not honored in his own country. Money is one form of honor—oom. This country does me the honor of giving me its shekels. Can I ask more?"

Miss Richards fainted one night in her dressing-room just as the curtain was going up on the first act of "Satan's Emissary." In a very few moments it was ascertained she could not possibly go on. Her features were locked in rigidity of muscle, her eyes rolled in her head uncontrollably, her face took on a hue that frightened everyone. They laid her on the stone floor and tried to beat circulation back into her extremities again.

"She's taken opium for years," said Beresford to Lal, as the latter stood shocked and silent just outside the room. "They all come to it to steady their nerves. It's telling on her."

Mr. White came hurrying up from downstairs.

"You know the part, Miss North? Well—here's your chance. Her clothes will about fit you—you're the same build. Hurry and get into this first act costume. Tommy'll call you in six minutes."

With quick but gentle movements he had removed Miss Richards' dress and the et ceteras attached, stopped to fling

a long cloak around the unconscious girl on the floor, and handed the costume to Lal.

Madam Joseph came running down the passage-way. Hurrying Lal into the first dressing-room at hand, she quickly proceeded to array her in Miss Richards' clothes.

"One's loss is another's gain," said Lal, her eyes blinking fast from excitement as she caught the soft lace fichu about her breast. "Isn't it terrible? I wonder if another profession under the sun affords such opportunities for chance as this."

"Oh, Moses me! Dearie, don't let father see you so oggscited. He will raise de devil. So. Now you look nice. So nice. Miss Richards never look like dot. You will do goot. I know. Go. Goot luck."

Feeling the tremendous significance of the occasion for her from the fluttering in her body, Lal nodded a "Yes, Tommy," as the little fellow rapped on the door, asking in his carefully controlled tones, "Are you ready, Miss North?"

Then she flew down the iron steps and stood in the wings waiting her cue.

Beresford and White were both by her side in an instant.

"It's a magnificent house," whispered the former. "You'll make a big step forward if you show Childslea you've made an impression."

"Don't think of Childslea at all," was White's advice. "Forget him and you'll come out all right. And remember—in the fainting scene, when he kisses you, be sure to respond. Nothing can make him madder if you're listless there. It's a critical point—it always tells."

"The devil!" growled Beresford. "If he touches your lips I'll throttle him."

"Oh, no, dear, you wouldn't do anything like that," said Lal; "that would be theatrical and—so unnecessary."

The stage manager moved away, his face shaded by a look of disappointment. He had heard the men and women discuss Beresford and Lal in light terms, but he had been sure of Lal's purity. He was positive that a girl of her character was above suspicion.

But now as he saw the light in her eyes as she looked up at Beresford, the tender expression of her whole face, he admitted to himself that where one breathed the atmosphere of sham love and admiration it was impossible to retain purity of character. She had gone the way of them all.

He had wondered at the beginning if she would be able to withstand the attentions Beresford knew so well how to call into practice. Women higher in the profession than she was, with as great a strength of character, had succumbed. It was a shame! And his kindly face blazed a moment with the warm blood of indignation.

Yet after all, it was what he had always seen, and always would see. What did it matter? If she answered the purpose of the company, if she found a niche and stood high in the praise of the public, she was fortunate; it was for that they all were striving. Only it seemed a pity—

He shrugged his shoulders, yet when Jack Prince lumbered up to give him some bit of information he nodded absent-mindedly, with his eyes fixed on Lal.

Beresford joined him as the moment came for her to go on, and the two watched her from the wings throughout her scene with an interest second to none.

"God! what a voice!" ejaculated the actor under his breath.

"Did you ever hear such melting sweetness?" said Ned Chevalier, joining them. "She's game, too. If she's nervous she doesn't show it. 'Father's' watching her all right. By Jove! I wonder if it will be more than artistic interest."

Beresford turned on him.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he asked, angrily. "Do you think Miss North's like the drabs in this theater, ready to run forward when he throws down the glove? Put a check on your tongue, young one."

"All right, Berry. Don't get huffy. Ow! look at that."

For Childslea had taken Lal in his arms and was pressing more than stage kisses upon her lips.

Beresford started forward with a curse ground back in his teeth. White laid a detaining hand upon him.

"What's the matter with you? An old stager like you to resent acting done well!" he said, *sotto voce.* "What's come over you, Berry?"

"Oh! shut up. Mind your own business, White," was the reply as the actor moved away, leaving the stage manager with a bitter grin upon his face.

Lal won her first curtain call that night, and seldom have the first joys of success been sweeter. She had never known a prouder moment than when, with Childslea, she stood bowing modestly to the tumultuous applause that greeted her climax to the second act. Childslea turned to her when the curtain went down. His eyes were gleaming.

"Let me congratulate you—oom. You have eclipsed me."

The envious glances of the women followed her as she made her way to her dressing-room to change her costume for the last act. The men smiled at the girlish pleasure that had illuminated her face when Childslea spoke to her.

All but Beresford. He detained her in the passage-way just outside her dressing-room door, looking at her with his searching eyes.

"You are wonderful," he said, noting the flush rise to her face at his words of praise; "but that hound dared to kiss you, really. Why did you let him?"

"Why, Yale, what a question! Would you have had me ruin the scene?" she asked in amaze.

"No—no. Of course not. You were not to blame, but I hated you both for it—yes, even you for a minute," as her surprised eyes looked up at him.

"But—not now?" she said, with a laugh, turning the handle of her dressing-room door. "Did I do well, Yale?"

"We were all astounded. You caught right hold and went through with it as if you had played it a hundred times," he replied, in genuine admiration. "But I think I'm better off in my room. I couldn't stand the next act. You've got to throw yourself at his head."

"Poor man!" and she vanished, leaving him in doubt as to whom she referred.

The following evening Miss Richards had resumed her own role and Lal, after her brief triumph, was forced to return to the inconspicuous part in the piece she had been playing. She felt it sorely, but realized the impossibility, at present, of being given important parts. Perhaps—next season would find her playing opposites to Childslea. If she could only retain his favor, do nothing to arouse his anger, however undeserved, she might be given the leading position with him. She felt herself blushing at her own temerity in dreaming of such a thing.

But, there had been her short-lived triumph of the night before. Surely she might hope after that. She could remember the looks of admiration upon the faces of some in the audience, catching them as she did while the curtain went down. In another year, if her position was assured, if her name was beginning to be spoken by the outside world, she would write to Peggy. She trembled at the mere thought of it. Write to Peggy! The bare idea caused a rush of emotion to sweep through her. Peggy and Howell should come to her in New York during the spring engagement even if she had to pay their fare herself.

Tommy's call, "Overture beginning to the first act, ple—ee—a—se," resounded through the flies and a moment later his respectful rat-tat at the door caused Lal to start from her musings to ask, "What is it, Tommy?"

"Mr. Childslea's in his dressing-room, Miss North. He told me to say he would like to see you just as soon as possible. Will you come now?"

"Right away, Tommy," she answered, pausing only to catch up a clean handkerchief from her satchel. She was still in her street dress and had not removed her hat. She always arrived at the theater very early, but her own part in "Satan's Emissary" did not call for her appearance until the last act.

She met no one going down the stairs. Everyone was in his or her dressing-room making up. Ever present Mr. White was talking to Beresford below stairs. She heard

their voices distinctly. Two scene shifters were breathing heavily, with half-closed eyes, against a cart filled with hay which was used in the last act. She passed them with a mental ejaculation of pity for their long hours.

At the rear of the stage, off by itself, was Childslea's dressing-room. It had no door, but a curtain swung loosely in its stead. A light streamed out from the aperture and revealed the actor at his dressing-table in front of the large mirror, making up for the first act of "Satan's Emissary." He was alone, for since the Philadelphia affair he had no valet save Tommy, or Madame Joseph, for whom he sent when in extremity.

He did not look up from the close observation he was making of himself in the mirror as Lal cleared her throat, lightly drawing aside the curtain. Instead he said, with all his energies seemingly bent upon the rouging of his lips:

"Come in, Miss North, come in. Don't stand there in that ceremonious fashion—oom."

Lal kept her position as she replied:

"Thank you, Mr. Childslea, but what you have to say to me can be said while I stand here, can it not?"

He drew back quickly from the mirror, pencil in hand, his glowing eyes containing a glance of reproach she had often seen him assume when acting. He said, however:

"I want to talk to you. If you take this repellant attitude how do you expect me to speak pleasantly? Come in—oom."

Disarmed by his business-like manner, with a little backward glance, she stepped from the threshold just inside the room. She stood at the end of the dressing-table, her eyes observing all the endless et ceteras of his make-up. It was a wonderful array, and she learned many things in her comprehensive scrutiny.

He had put on the brown wig for which he had paid an extravagant price, and its satin glossiness made him look almost young under the electric light. Make-up aided him as it aided few. As the devil-may-care hero of the play

he was a fascinating figure. Admiration was rightfully his due and there was none who did not accord it.

Lal thought him very handsome in this guise, and her glance betrayed her. Childslea saw it, but went on with his make-up, drawing a line here, putting a touch there to produce the desired effect.

"Are you wondering why I sent for you?" he asked, apparently absorbed in his work.

"To be perfectly frank, Mr. Childslea, I think I have an inkling," said Lal promptly.

"Oh! State it—what you think—oom."

"I may be wrong, but—is it—is it in regard to playing better parts?"

"Exactly. What an acute perception you have of things —oom."

A sardonic expression contorted his face, making it fiendish under the grease paint.

"It is so kind of you," began Lal.

"You don't know what it is yet. Like a woman—clasping a possibility as a reality. But you're young—oom."

He paused a moment to flick away too heavy a bit of penciling and then resumed.

"How would you like to play 'leads' the remainder of the season, beginning, say—Monday night of next week?"

Lal started forward eagerly, her expressive face alight with happiness.

"Oh, Mr. Childslea, if I may! Will you trust me like this? Oh, I will work hard indeed. I—"

She stopped suddenly and the look of eagerness fled from her face. A melancholy spread over her features instead and the light died out of her eyes. The actor put down his pencil abruptly to demand:

"Well, in God's name, what is it, child? Are you going to have a fit?"

"Miss Richards—" said Lal, hesitatingly. "You are not discharging her because—"

Childslea went on with his work again.

"Frightened lest you have usurped her rights?—oom.

But that is the way of the world. But in this case you need have no compunctions. Miss Richards realizes her inability to go on with us, and has asked to be released from her contract. She is sick and is going home—oom. The best place for her. She ought never to have left it. This necessitates my getting a new leading woman. I thought of you before sending elsewhere. Do you care to try it?"

"Oh! Above everything!"

Lal's face was speaking for her again, and Childslea laughed his mirthless laugh.

"Hah! it pleases you. If—"

"Oh, do you really think I have advanced enough to merit this?" Lal dared to interrupt, with an anxious tone to her voice.

"I do not. Not even in the face of your work last night—oom."

Lal's face fell. She looked at him wistfully.

"Then you don't think me capable just yet?" she said.

"Not yet. You are so crude yet in your methods. Still—I am going to give the position to you. You will play all the leading parts. Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice,' Lady Anne in 'Richard,' Rosa and Marcelle in 'An Italian Love Story,' and they are difficult parts—oom."

"I know, but I—"

He interrupted her.

"You would say you will work so hard you will deserve them. Bah! I didn't ask you here to have you tell me that. Do you know why I have given you this opportunity? Don't you consider it extraordinary?"

He had laid down his brush again, and came slightly toward her.

"It is a heavy debt," said Childslea, with a smile, "but you can repay it. Any woman could."

"I have no money," faltered Lal, while her sleeping consciousness struggled to awaken.

"Innocence! Is it real or assumed, I wonder? There are other ways than money. Do you understand?"

His gaze, which had become almost hypnotic, seemed to

pin her to the floor. She could not speak, but stood staring at him. For once Childslea misunderstood. A woman's silence meant only to him speechless admiration, deep emotion, or consent. He stretched out his hand and said in his powerful voice, the deeper for its control:

"Be my mistress. You'll not regret it."

Then did Lal seem to be able to throw off the spell closing round her. Her fixed eyes saw only two things—the evil face leering three feet in front of her, and a large china dish of grease paint on the end of the dressing-table.

She never thought of consequences, not for a second did the future loom before her as, with a quick movement, she caught up the dish and her steady right hand aimed it with full force straight into the actor's face.

She saw that the stuff blinded him and sent him staggering back, that the terrific force with which she had flung the dish had broken it across his face, that the blood was streaming in a cut down the bridge of his nose and mingling its crimson fluid with the scented white cream; that he was groping madly for a towel and breaking forth into bellows that made her think of Nineveh and the bulls upon every farm surrounding.

She saw all this and without a word turned and walked calmly out of the dressing-room.

CHAPTER XIII

Up to her own recently vacated dressing-room she returned, not pausing to put on her veil, but gathering up her make-up and brushes to put away in her satchel. As she was buttoning on her coat she heard the hurry of feet below on the stage, a string of oaths delivered by Burton, with an admonitory word from Williams and an ejaculation from

Beresford. She knew that the news of the catastrophe to Childslea was being pretty well disseminated.

Temple's voice came up to her through the flies from the stage below, telling Mr. White to send Tommy for a surgeon to sew it up, that it was a nasty cut. Then quick footsteps echoed along the stone passage-way and she recognized Beresford's knock upon her door.

"Lal, Lal, we won't play to-night. Childslea's met with an awful accident."

She pushed open the door and stepped out beside him, dressed for the street. He was in the regimentals his part demanded in the play.

"Oh, you knew it?" he said, looking at her.

"Yes," her voice was controlled with an effort; "I knew it."

"You weren't downstairs. We just found him—Burton and I. We heard him bellowing. Where were you?"

She started to go down the stairs.

"I want to go back to the house right away, Yale. I don't feel very well. Let me by, please."

Then he leaned forward suddenly to look at her.

"Lal!" he exclaimed. "Where were you? Tell me, child. Were you—"

"Yes, I was. He sent for me and I went, thinking it had to do only with my playing better parts. It did, but—he insulted me and I threw the dish at him. That sounds like the woes of a Harlam flat couple, doesn't it?"

"He insulted you, did he? I feared this. The hound!" Beresford bent over the railing to glare in the direction of the dressing-room. "My God! why is dueling forbidden? I would shoot him down like a rat but for complications. I don't know but what you have scored heavily for yourself, though, Lal. He can't play to-night. Temple's got to dismiss the audience."

"I can't say I'm sorry. I—"

"Why should you be? Everyone will bless you for it—but the audience. And as they get their money refunded,

why should they object to a disappointment occasionally? Heaven knows we actors are a disappointed lot of creatures half the time."

"I'm going now, Yale. Shall I see you to-morrow at the house?"

"I'm not going to let you stir from this place without me," he answered; "no, dear, I'm not," as he caught her reluctant look. "Stay here till I change my clothes. I'll be with you in fifteen minutes."

He pushed her gently into her dressing-room and hurried away.

Then the reaction came to the girl. The shame and degradation of the insult Childslea had put upon her seemed to come home with terrific force. She leaned her head on her hand and wept bitter tears of mortification. So far she had escaped, personally, all the common side of stage life. Her dignified manner had been her armor against any assault upon her womanhood.

But, it seemed, it had not been protection enough against this Childslea, this beast in human guise, who laughed at the possibility of a woman's purity. She had never done anything to provoke his desire to test her strength. Certainly, no woman could ever have deserved such a bald and brutal proposition as had been her lot to endure to-night. She felt the result of her furious impulsiveness was trivial compared to the outrage done her womanhood.

And yet, it would cost her her position in the company. Just when the prospect seemed very bright, when her hopes were beginning to assume definite shape, a matter of a quarter of an hour's interchange of words between the actor and herself had resulted in this! It was bitterly hard. She wondered how she could bear it. Her dismissal meant suspension of the work she loved for the rest of the season. When she began again it would be under no such bright auspices as had started her upon her theatrical career. Such a beginning as she had had came but once in a lifetime. She would have to—

Beresford's voice outside her door recalled her to herself.

"Now, dear, we'll go. All the others have gone except Temple. He's with the surgeon in 'Father's' dressing-room. It's a bad cut, but not so bad it won't heal in a couple of days. 'Father' thinks none of us knows how it happened. He isn't in any hurry to have us know, I'll wager. But it means your dismissal, Lal, I'm afraid. The reason won't be given out, but you'll hear from Temple, all the same."

"Oh, I know it. That's the hardest part."

They were walking along a darkened side street now, and she clung more closely to his arm. Her voice betrayed the bitter disappointment she was suffering keenly.

"Don't take it so hard, little girl. They'll discharge you with your season's salary, if that's any consolation. I can't see the matter in such a doleful light as you do, because it makes you turn to me. With no parts in mimic life to play the rest of the season you can devote yourself to the part I've asked you to take with me in real life. And when the season's over, I've done with Childslea. We'll get an engagement with Mrs. Foster. I won't get the salary I'm getting with this brute, but I'll have you with me, and we couldn't possibly find harder lines in another company."

Beresford's voice had passed from gentle persuasion to open cheerfulness. He looked down tenderly at the slight figure at his side. But she could not control the trembling of her lips as she said:

"The prospect was so encouraging. I—I—didn't dream—"

"Well, I did. I suspected that devil some time ago. But he never showed it toward you till the night you played Judith. I tried to think he was only seeing in you more of the artiste than in any of the women he has ever had in the company. But I might have known. You had a charm for him he hadn't found in the others. You—"

"Oh, don't," she pleaded; "it makes me so sick at my stomach to think of him."

"Well, now," he said as they turned down the street

where she was domiciled while in Chicago, "will you tell me what you're going to do?"

"I don't know, Yale." The helplessness of her tones was apparent.

"Do you want me to plan your course?"

"Yes, if you don't make it too tempestuous."

"Well—it will be at first. For I want you to marry me right away and you know the happiness of married people at first is always tempestuous."

"Is it? I don't know how people who haven't been married are able to make such an assertion."

Beresford's brows contracted ever so slightly.

"Well, imagination goes a great way in life. Can't you imagine how when we're first married I sha'n't give you a moment's peace? I shall tell you so often how I love you, how happy you have made me, and all that sweet nonsense, dear, that we'll have to have storms if only to dispel the tedium. Now, Lal—when?"

"When—what?"

"As if you didn't know! Don't put me off any longer, darling. We must be married to-morrow."

"But how will it look, Yale? You'll think I married you to save myself from looking for something till next season."

She looked at him wistfully.

"Will I? Do you know my own thoughts so much better than I do? Lal, my dear little girl, if you marry me tomorrow I shall think the reason is that you love me too much to bear the pain of needless separation."

"We would have to be separated," she admitted, "unless we marry."

"But once you are my wife, heaven and hell will not be able to separate us. I shall stipulate for a section in another car from the company. We can be alone with our happiness, and we can ignore the others. I am accustomed to them, but you are not of their ilk, and I shall take good care you never are."

She laughed a little.

"Others don't make you. Too much is attributed to influence. Character is bound to assert itself."

"Is it to-morrow, then?" he asked, refusing to let her withdraw her hand as they stood waiting for the house door to be opened.

"Yes," with a swift look into his eyes, telling so much.

"In the morning, then. I'll be around at 11."

He drew her into his arms to kiss her as they heard the maid coming along the hall.

"Good-night, my darling. I'm not worth your love, but God knows I love you as I never loved woman."

Then he released her.

Girl-like, when the door had closed and the maid had disappeared, from the recess of the parlor window curtains she watched his figure recede down the street.

CHAPTER XIV

Promptly at 11 Beresford appeared, the following morning. Lal came down to the deserted parlor, blushing deeply. She was dressed in the heavy cheviot that emphasized her fragility. Her lover caught her to him with a movement of uncontrollable yearning.

"You're like a reed, you graceful child. These aren't bride roses, but they'll brighten you a great deal more."

He drew from their wrappings a dozen great roses, heavy with perfume, luscious in their full redness, and laid them against her breast.

"Red roses!" exclaimed she; "Peggy wore them, and now I shall. They are lovely."

"And how typical of passion they are. What a significance there is in still life."

In the exuberance of his spirits, he cut short the words

upon her lips by covering her face with the full-blown beauties, and kissed her mouth through the velvet petals.

She made a laughing murmur of disapproval.

"You impetuous fellow. You'll bruise these darlings. Be careful, Yale."

"You see I am dallying with my happiness," he laughed; "every moment I am deferring the time when you will become my own. Isn't it a glorious morning? Too bad our wedding is to be so private. But then, one's happiness at such a time should be one's own. There—let me wrap these up again. Did you see Temple this morning?"

"Yes, he was here an hour ago. He was very nice about it, but it was the first time I had ever seen him embarrassed. He said he regretted the circumstance more because I had given promise of success, but that Childslea wouldn't take me back if he never found a woman to realize his idea of what an actress should be."

"I suppose not. It was a mortal insult. Why, think of it, Lal. Your swift retribution was the first assault ever made upon that carefully cared-for body of his. It was this little hand of yours that created such disaster last night. I hope it will never be raised against me," he said, with a look of mischief.

"How horrid you are!" reproachfully; "can you imagine such a contingency?"

"Why, yes—when you cease to love me."

"With some it is so easy to cease to love. That is because love of self, love of honor, or something, is placed before. Love may go through many phases of seeming change, but I believe it is often with us when we think otherwise."

"Then you don't think we will cease to care for each other?" he asked.

"I can't anticipate such a thing for myself. For you—that is difficult to say. A man seeks change so much more than a woman. But if it should come—" her lower lip

trembled, as she endeavored to calm the emotion called forth by the suggestion of such a possibility, "Oh, Yale! Oh, Yale!—"

She could not proceed. His arms were about her in an instant and her sobs were stifled by his passionate kisses.

"Wasn't it cruel of me to let you think even for a moment that there would come a time when I would be weaned from you? Forgive me, forgive me, dear. I didn't mean it. There—pull yourself together. If you don't I shall begin to suspect you are going to give me the slip after all."

Already her face was lightened by her buoyancy. He helped her on with her jacket and together they went out.

The air was delightfully cold with an agreeable nip to it. The two were exhilarated beyond expression.

"It will be high noon before we are married," said Beresford, glancing at his watch; "did you tell Temple anything?"

"No, indeed. It lessens the beauty of such things to talk of them, I think."

"It is just as well you said nothing. I—"

"But I wish we might have had Mr. White come along with us, Yale," she said; "I like him so."

"Jimmie White is away ahead of the others, but what's the use of bringing in anyone? The minister will probably have relatives of some sort as witnesses."

At a house on the fashionable side of Chicago, the door was opened by some one evidently a member of the family. She was a pretty girl with interest in life written very strongly upon her features. The expression upon her face as she looked at Beresford was an amusing one, so curiously blended were animation, curiosity and an attempt at concealment of a thoroughly aroused interest.

Beresford, accustomed to being stared at, didn't mind the lively scrutiny to which he was now subjected. He knew they were recognized, for the girl's delighted look upon seeing him intensified as her eyes quickly traveled to Lal's face.

"You wish to see my father?" she asked, with the pleasant hospitality indicative of interested youth.

"Doctor Putnam? If you please," said Beresford, with his most impressive air.

"Right away. I'll tell him."

Showing them into the parlor, she left them. She returned presently with a gray-haired man of most benign aspect, who approached them with hand extended. To Beresford's amusement and Lal's surprise, the young woman, evidently the minister's daughter, remained in the room.

"I am Doctor Putnam," said the gentleman, pleasantly; "and I don't think I am mistaken, but isn't this Mr. Beresford of Mr. Childslea's company? And this lady is Miss Richards? My daughter and I saw you both play the other night. Such clever work."

"This lady is Miss North," said Beresford, presenting Lal; "she took Miss Richards' place at a very few minutes' notice the other evening. We—"

"Ah! indeed. She is the more to be commended. You players are such wonderful people. You seem capable of anything. My daughter and I liked the little play so much the other night—this is my daughter, Mr. Beresford, Miss North—and that scene where—"

"You do us too much honor, Doctor," Beresford put in; "it is especially gratifying to hear the ministry praise our work. We need your help and sympathy. We especially need it this morning. That is, Miss North and I have come here to ask you to marry us."

"How delightful!" exclaimed the very young person, eagerly drinking in every word of the conversation, "but in the play," to Lal, "you were in love with Mr. Childslea, weren't you?"

"Patty!" interposed her father, with something like reproof in his tones.

"Well, that's so," said Miss Patty, undauntedly, "isn't it?" appealing to Lal.

"Yes," replied Lal, smiling at the extreme youth of the girl, "but fortunately and unfortunately, things do not happen in real life as they do in the mimic. Mr. Childslea is married, Miss Putnam."

"Oh, is he?" the girl advanced, irresistibly drawn by Lal's manner; "and now you and Mr. Beresford are going to be." She looked her undisguised admiration. "It's so interesting. Will you let me play a wedding march for you? It would be something to remember, and—and so romantic? Will you, please?"

"Why, I am sure I should be most happy," was Lal's reply; "it's very sweet of you to offer. It will take away the strangeness of it all. Yale," turning to Beresford, who was talking to the minister, "Miss Putnam will play for us, she says."

"Very charming of Miss Putnam, I am sure," returned Beresford, with a glance which caused that young lady to beam blissfully, "and now, if you please, Doctor, we haven't much time. Luncheon and a matinee claim us this afternoon. Will you marry us right away?"

"Immediately. This way into the sitting-room, please. It's cheerier and we keep the piano there; my daughter plays so often for me. I'll call my sister and her husband, who are visiting us, for witnesses. We—"

"No, no; I must be one, papa," interposed Miss Putnam with decision; "I feel as if this wedding were under my especial supervision. Let me—"

"Three witnesses, then," laughed Beresford; "one extra doesn't matter, I'm sure."

They entered the bright little room, Beresford's charm of manner captivating Miss Patty completely. His tender attitude to Lal, the expression of his eyes, held the girl in thrall. She sighed as her gaze followed his every movement.

"You're just like what you are on the stage," said she, in a burst of admiration; "actors are such gallant men, and so fascinating."

Lal laughed.

"Indeed, you are mistaken, Miss Putnam," she said, much amused by the girl's youth. Her own four years' seniority made her feel very maternal. "Actors are below the average mortal when it comes to thoughtfulness. Of course Mr. Beresford is an exception, but don't be deceived by what

you see from the right side of the footlights. The wrong side tells more."

Miss Patty shook her head unconvinced. When the minister's sister and her husband had joined them she was still gazing with yearning eyes at Beresford, who was endeavoring to appear quite unconscious of the admiration he had aroused.

"Now, Patty," said her father, as he returned clothed in his vestments; "strike up your wedding march while Mr. Beresford and Miss North take their places."

Thus recalled to the reality of the situation, the young girl broke into the jubilant chords of Mendelssohn's Wedding March. From time to time she glanced over her shoulder as her father found the place in his book, while Beresford drew Lal to his side, as, with bowed head, she waited for the first words of the minister.

Patty's music grew softer, her touch lighter, as the solemnity of the occasion began to make itself felt upon her usually bubbling spirits. This wedding, though so quiet and informal, seemed far more beautiful to her than others had been. The romantic atmosphere of the stage was too apparent over all to be ignored, and this, together with Beresford's distinguished face and figure, and the rare sweetness of the girl being made his wife, swept over the imaginative mind at the piano keys like the languorous breeze of a summer day.

When the marriage ceremony began the Wedding March died away in diminuendo, and gliding into another and minor key the musician's fingers made the keys fairly sing out a melody rich in beauty, deep in its wealth of expression.

Beresford, whose arm touched Lal, felt a tremor seize her. He bent forward anxiously, thinking the service was responsible for her emotion. He didn't blame her; the beauty of it impressed him to his very great surprise. But the tremor was not transitory. Another and deeper shook her, and she swayed slightly. She essayed to speak. Beresford made a movement of interruption.

Doctor Putnam stopped. He caught an expression in Lal's eyes that fairly staggered him. Such a look of beseeching misery deepened them. The good man seemed disconcerted. Then he heard Beresford saying tenderly:

"What is it, dear? Bear up. It will soon be over."

Then Lal's voice, tremblingly:

"Oh, it isn't what you think. It's so foolish. You'll think me out of my senses, but—beg her to stop, Yale. I can't bear it."

Beresford's expression showed the relief he felt.

"It's the music," he said, in explanation, to the minister, smiling a little; "it affects her always. If Miss Patty—"

Doctor Putnam bowed.

"Patty," he said, "that will do, dear. You—"

"I don't mind if she plays something else," came from Lal, in a low voice; "it was only that piece."

"Will you go on now, Doctor?" said Beresford, trying not to see Patty's injured looks.

When the ceremony was over, the papers signed, and Doctor Putnam was patting Lal gently on the back making some jocular remark, Beresford apologized to Patty quite to the young lady's satisfaction, for the abrupt interruption of her music.

"It's just that one piece that always upsets her, Miss Patty," he said, "and you happened unfortunately to hit upon it. Otherwise your music was like yourself—pretty and charming."

The charm of the compliment was dimmed a little by the rebuff she had received.

"I thought you would like it," she answered; "it's a lovely thing. I learned it after I heard it played during that other piece you play in, where Mr. Childslea brings Miss Richards home from skating. That's why I thought you'd both like it."

"It was very thoughtful of you, indeed," returned Beresford earnestly, "and I appreciate it. But, you see, my wife once heard it under peculiar circumstances. You'll forgive

her, won't you? It's the first favor I've asked of anyone for her."

His manner was so propitiatory, his voice so mellow, that Patty, overcome by the expressive eyes, yielded in spite of herself.

Once outside, Beresford said to Lal:

"My dear girl, you must rid yourself of this absurd superstition of yours. You'll make yourself miserable. Don't you suppose—"

"Oh, but Yale, dear, it's held such a queer influence over me," returned she; "you know I heard it that night I met you in Nineveh; I heard it again the night you told me you loved me, and now, to-day! It's fairly haunted me. And you know, the palmist said to beware of the circumstances every time I heard it."

"They all seem to hedge around me somehow, don't they?" he laughed; "these circumstances? Now, tell me, did anything terrible befall after that night in the flies?"

"No," she confessed, "but you must admit it's peculiar the way it's followed me."

"Oh, yes, it is certainly peculiar. But as for attributing anything more important to it than that, it's rankest folly, Lal. Come now, now you're mine, I'm going to assert my authority. I absolutely forbid you to think any more about this foolish thing, now and forever. Do you hear me, my new-made spouse?"

"I have taken the vows of obedience," but the laugh in her voice was contradicted by the sadness of her eyes.

"Come, it's our wedding morning," said Beresford; "do you think I'm going to let this funereal state of affairs mar it? We'll lunch, and then—what will you do this afternoon? Do you want to see the play from the front?"

"Yes, I should like to. A good time to criticise you legitimately."

So they had their first meal together, laughing into each other's happy eyes across the table, making little plans only to disarrange them for the pleasure of talking them all over

again, scandalizing the sedate waiter by their reckless disregard for the fitness of things when Beresford ordered oysters after the meat, and was otherwise oblivious of detail in the one great delight that they were now one.

Then the matinee had to be gotten through before they could again be in happy companionship. Beresford met her afterward in the foyer of the theater. He had objected strongly when she had proposed she should go around to the stage door for him.

"No, indeed; I don't want you to have another thing to say or do with those people. And you shall not run the risk of any word from Childslea."

For dinner they went to a Bohemian haunt at the other end of the city where they felt they would be free from meeting anyone they knew. Then Beresford registered their names at the hotel where he was staying before he returned to the theater.

"I can hardly believe you're mine," he said, as they turned away from the book.

"It does seem unreal, but how quickly that will pass away. In a week we shall be so accustomed to each other we'll wonder how we ever were strangers."

"We never were that, Lal. Don't you know some people never have the 'strange' period? The first minute I ever saw you I said, 'Darling!' to you—in my heart."

Then he left her for the evening performance. She had promised to wait his return in the reading-room of the hotel.

Ah! those hours of happy suspense, knowing the very minute of his return, knowing, too, that no power on earth could keep him from her after the final fall of the curtain. Page after page of the periodicals she turned, never seeing the pictures, comprehending none of the jokes, absorbing no news. Her thoughts refused to go further than her new-found happiness, the fact that she was the wife of the man she loved.

At 11 o'clock she went upstairs, first telling the clerk to inform Mr. Beresford that she had gone to their room,

There she waited, moving restlessly about, picking up first one thing, then another, pausing in her walk up and down the room to listen for his footsteps.

And at last they came. Her heart gave a leap as the firm tread she knew so well was heard along the hall. She was half way across the floor, but not before the door was opened and Beresford sprang into the room. His eyes were gleaming. The eagerness of his manner evidenced itself in the way in which he threw aside his hat and coat.

"An eternity!" he said, as he warded her off while he removed his coat; "I thought I'd never reach you, my darling. Wait—wait—till I brush this snow off. I'm hungry for your arms, but not till I'm dry will I touch you."

"What do I care for the wet? It's you, Yale; it's you, my beloved," she said, going to him; "never mind the snow. Kiss me!"

But he shook his head.

"My way, my Lal. Wait; here's my smoking jacket. Wait till I get into it."

Laughing at the vexation in her clear eyes, he drew on the padded affair that served as a jacket. Then he held out his arms.

"Now, my wife!"

In a second he had her closely gathered to him, his eyes were seeking hers, his lips drinking the sweetness of her own.

CHAPTER XV

If it was known in the company that Lal was traveling with them along their route in another car with Beresford, no comment was made. She saw none of her old companions within hailing distance, had she desired to talk to them.

And Beresford screened her jealously from all possible chance of meeting any of them. He was with her constantly while en route, and took her to the most expensive hotels, far beyond the resources of the pocketbooks of the others. He spent his money lavishly, as only an actor knows how. Her every wish was anticipated, she lived in the sunlight of his love. The discomforts of traveling as they experienced it, catching trains at all hours of the night, were trivialities they had no time to grumble over while lost in their great love for each other.

The few hours' separation entailed by Beresford being at the theater were their only moments of unhappiness. But they served only to increase their delight in each other. After a performance Beresford returned to his wife with an added brilliancy to the lovelight in his eyes, finding in the sweet face raised for his caresses the power of a passion that matched his own.

Oh! the golden days of youth and love when the whole nature, bursting with a happiness that knows no expression, loses itself to everything save that one other nature for whom it lives. Nothing is so fleeting as youth. It is gone before we realize it. And in bitter and mysterious contrast old age drags on unpityingly with little to illumine the "sere and yellow leaf" but remembrance. Thank God for that. For though the bitter and the sweet combine in everything, the sadness of remembrance must ever be pervaded and relieved by the sweetness of the past.

Lal was content to love and be loved, with all her passionate nature showing her happiness in her eyes, lips, hands and voice. Beresford, extravagant in everything, demanded it in this great love which had seized him. He could not find vent for it except in expressive speech and in devising all sorts of schemes to arouse in his wife that exuberance of spirit manifested so emphatically in himself since his marriage.

But Lal, warm in temperament as he, was calmness itself, at times showing her wisdom in waiting for his passion to expend itself so that she might woo it back by her own, held now in check. It was the sauce piquante to his love. He became more her lover with the advent of each day. She laughingly told him that she doubted he was her husband, he played the lover so well.

A barely perceptible shade of annoyance entered his eyes. But it faded to nothingness as the tempting curve of her lips caused him to catch her to him in one of his excesses of happiness.

"Lover or husband, I'm yours alone, and you're mine, mine only," with an exultant laugh; "you never could have possibly been anyone's else. You were made for me, do you know it?"

"How absurd! If we had not met I must have seen someone else and married," she answered, smiling at the contradictory expression settling upon his face.

"No, sir. The superstition grafted in an actor wouldn't allow me to think that. You know you believe my way, you bit of obstinacy, don't you?"

"Of course. I wanted to see what you really believed."

She raised herself in his arms to run her hand through his heavy hair, which was her glory and pride.

"Why, Yale, not for the world would I have married unless I had found a man your exact counterpart—with this hair—do you know how perfectly beautiful it is?—with these dear eyes—how they look at me—and this cleft in your chin, and this mouth; it looks as if it were chiseled in marble—"

"How looks belie one, then. It's warmer than marble, and it was made to kiss only you. How you tease me!" for she drew back suddenly dodging, and his lips lost themselves in her hair.

"Do I?" and she laughed provokingly; "Oh, no, no; don't. Don't, Yale," struggling, for he was holding her tightly, endeavoring to quiet her long enough to kiss her.

He won, but she lay passive in his arms as he took it. He looked down at her with disappointment in his eyes.

"You're cold, aren't you?" he said with resentment; "such quiet lips."

Then she laughed.

"Cold? With my hair?" and she laughed again. "Oh, Yale; how little you know."

"Then you're playing with me. Can't you let yourself go just once?"

"I'm afraid."

"Why?"

"Because it is wise to keep a man always expecting. If I met your love with equal fervor you would grow to care less for me. See how I'm giving myself away to you."

"I don't see it. I've been waiting for a kiss of your own free will ever since we've been married, and—"

"Such a long time," she laughed; "three days."

"It doesn't seem an hour," he said ardently.

That afternoon a heavy rain set in shortly after luncheon. With no rehearsal or matinee Beresford proposed to spend the hours before dinner in a grand clearance of his possessions.

"I've got the greatest lot of useless baggage in one of my trunks," he said; "things collect like barnacles. I've shirked a general weeding-out for weeks. We'll go over them together and I'll leave the disposal of things to you."

She laughed when he opened the trunk in their room and she stood before the jumbled contents.

"So like a man," she said, as she surveyed the pile of letters, photographs, knick-knacks, slippers and other things

thrown in indiscriminately, "but I didn't know it was as bad as this. From your adorers, I suppose?"

"Whatever you've a mind to call them," said Beresford with a shrug, "the more expensive things I always return. I couldn't reconcile my conscience to holding on to jeweled match safes, diamond cuff links and the like. But these things are trifles and I keep them till I have a grand overhauling, when I discard the useless things, and give away the duplicates."

"It must have kept you busy acknowledging them," observed Lal, as she inspected a dainty affair of lace and ribbons, presumably a handkerchief holder.

"I got tired of that years ago, when I was at my callow period."

"You at a callow period," she laughed.

"Well—unsophisticated, then. I wasn't born with a knowledge of the world, child."

"One would think so," she commented.

"Lord, no. You should have seen me in my green and salad days. That was twenty years ago, Lal, when I hadn't seen you. Why, you must have been a tot of a year old."

He had drawn a low chair beside her as she sat before the heterogeneous mass of things strewn upon the tray, and rested his hand upon her hair as she leaned against his knee.

"These are the accumulations of three months," he went on, smiling at the expression upon her face; "just after we left New York I had to invest in another trunk, things began to collect so. I used to answer this kind of notes once," taking up a handful of variously tinted and scented envelopes, "first out of sheer curiosity—then, to give paternal advice. They are what are commonly called 'mash' notes. I don't pay any attention to them now. Thank God, you never belonged to this band of half-demented creatures who make an actor's life a disgust to him at times."

"They are to be pitied," said Lal, as she ran her eyes over a few of the letters and stuffed them away in the scrap basket as she tore them to pieces; "a girl is not necessarily

a fool because the first outpourings of her romantic nature center themselves in the hero of a mimic world. The love of the beautiful, the artistic, of virtue and glowing manhood triumphant over evil (for the hero always wins, doesn't he?) is awakened for the first just as her sleeping womanhood is aroused. The slip of seventeen is a dreamy, ideal-seeking, untutored girl, Yale. She doesn't know life at all. If warm blood runs through her, intense emotion called up by splendid manhood must find expression. Look at this. It's pathetic."

She held out a dainty piece of note paper on which could be discerned the handwriting betraying the maiden, but in which traces of a lingering childhood also were evident.

He read over her shoulder:

"DEAR MR. BERESFORD:

"I saw you play the other night and I think you are so much grander than Mr. Childslea. Many people don't think so, but I don't see how they can. All the girls at our school think you are perfectly magnificent. Won't you please send me your photograph and your autograph? I will be so happy, and I hope it isn't asking too much.

"Admiringly yours,

"ALYS MAE GOODALE."

"Poor child! Her youth is evident in the way she spells her name. It was probably A-l-i-c-e M-a-y once," said Lal, as another note found its final destination.

"Bah! They're silly fools," ejaculated Beresford; "there may be some excuse for the very young ones, but what are you to say of the old ones? Here's a woman wanted to adopt me—to play to her only, I suppose. I remember that one."

He pointed to a large stiff envelope on top of a heap of others. Lal took it up and glanced through the contents.

"A maiden lady, evidently," she remarked, as she gave it to him to throw aside.

"How can you tell?" asked Beresford; "she writes a pretty hand for an old maid, if she's one."

"Look at the embossed tabby at the top," said Lal.

He laughed at the picture of a small cat ornamenting the paper.

"Positive proof, I admit. What are those?" nodding at the lapful she was discarding.

"More billets doux. You vain boy to have kept them all!"

"I only did it for you. I knew you'd enjoy going through them."

"But I don't. They're all on the same order. No originality. Whose photographs are these?" as she resurrected some three dozen pictures of men and women to look at leisurely.

"Mine," he answered promptly.

"Brilliant boy. I know that. But of whom are they?"

"You surely don't want a biography of each one?" he ejaculated.

"I do. Are they all friends?"

"But—" he objected.

"My liege lord, it is a little boon I ask you. Will you refuse so early in the day? Will you—"

Further speech from her was checked by his usual method of silencing her.

"How do you know but what you have aroused in me an inclination to fairy tales?" he asked, glancing at the photographs, four of which lying uppermost were the heads of beautiful women.

"But you know I love the truth," she said, looking at him, "you wouldn't lie to me, Yale?"

"Of course not. I was joking. But some of these people I've never even seen."

He picked up the photograph of a lovely face, high bred and cultured looking.

"Why, how's that? Surely women don't send their photographs to you unasked?"

"That's what they do—more fools they. And you can't stop it. It's too much bother to return each one, let alone

a fortune in stamps expended, so I cart them around, looking at them occasionally when I feel like communing with the beautiful in Nature, until I reach New York. Then I pack them off to the nearest photographer."

"To what lengths won't women go when passion for a man's attractive face is the object! And some of the women are utter strangers to you?"

"Never saw them in my life. They write for my photograph and send me theirs. A few are candidates for histrionic honors and want a flattering opinion of their pictures."

Beresford laughed as he tossed a couple of them back in the trunk.

"She is beautiful," said Lal with a sparkle of enthusiasm, scanning earnestly the photograph she held.

"Yes; I knew her. It was an outrageous case. She was married to an old fellow worth a million, and a woman of great social prominence. She had two lovely children. She ought to have spent her superfluous energy on them. I met her at a dinner party in Baltimore. She looked lovely that night, and such a brilliant conversationalist as she was! She asked me to call. I did, thinking that the mother of two children would never entertain any thought of me other than that of friendship. She had a sumptuous home, but not enough to occupy her. She was miserable; she used to come to the theater every night and sit in a box and throw me bouquets. Her husband learned of it and made her a prisoner in her own home. I was denied the house. She escaped one night, came to me in my room at the hotel and asked me to elope with her."

"Yale!" came in horror stricken tones from his wife.

"Naturally I declined with thanks. The sexes tire so soon of each other under dishonorable circumstances; and, too, I didn't care to smirch my career in any such way."

"What became of her?" asked Lal, giving the pictured face another earnest glance before putting it aside.

"She committed suicide, poor morbid thing; shot herself in her home one night. And the papers dragged my name

into the affair, and though I tried to explain, I was in bad odor for some time.—That was an early love of mine," he went on, as Lal chose another photograph; "she married recently and sent me this, taken on her wedding tour.—That is Countess Rudolph who was pitchforked on to the stage; and that is—My God! child; what's the matter?"

For Lal had uttered a startled cry as, bursting into tears, she snatched up a photograph which had slipped from underneath the others, and was scanning it eagerly.

"Roy!" she sobbed; "dear Roy! Oh, Yale, you knew him. Where? When? Were you his friend? Tell me what you know of him."

She was choking with the vehemence of her emotion and Beresford had quickly lifted her up to his knee. Drawing her to him, he laid his face against hers.

"Is he such a friend, you excitable child? Do you want to make me jealous? You—"

"Friend? Oh, don't you know? But, of course, you—Why, Roy was my brother. He—"

"Your brother? Roy Weston your brother? Why, dear, aren't you making a mistake? What are you talking about? This is Roy Weston. We played together in the same company eight or ten months ago."

"Did you?" and controlling herself, Lal wiped her eyes to look at the photograph again; "this is my brother Roy, Yale, whether his name was Weston or not."

She turned the picture over in her hand and uttered an exclamation.

In the well-known handwriting she read, "Yale Beresford, from Roy Weston, with sincere regard."

"His handwriting," she murmured; "we never knew he went under an assumed name, though I suspected he was an actor long before I knew it. I used to address him 'General Delivery,' under his own name. I—Oh! Yale—"

She was crying and clung to him again.

"Where is he now?" asked Beresford after a moment, soothing her.

"Dead. Last—"

"Dead? Good God!" exclaimed her husband; "Roy dead? Oh, poor fellow! Poor fellow! How did it happen? Were you with him?"

Then she told him all, trying to control herself as she progressed in her story, and breaking down, sobbing uncontrollably, as she reached the point relating how her brother had died.

Beresford was visibly affected.

"Poor fellow! He was so bright and full of humor. It's awful to think of him being cut off like that. Why, Lal, he was the soul of the company. Everybody loved him. He was like a younger brother to me. Poor young one, I did my best to keep him—"

He paused, but she said quietly:

"I know he drank. Peggy and I found a letter in his pocket which—why, Yale, only you could have written that note," she said as her face lightened with understanding.

"Letter? What—oh! in regard to warning him—to go slow?"

"Signed 'From You Know Whom.' That's the one. How good you must have been to him."

She clasped his arm with her hands and looked up in his face.

"I hated to see him throw his life away. He could have risen to the top niche. And you were the little sister of whom he talked so much. Why, he showed me a picture of her once, taken when she was budding. And it was you, Lal? To think of the links between. Strange. It's like a piece of fiction."

Together they finished their self-imposed task of weeding out all that was of no value. But Lal passed the remainder of the trunk's contents by without comment. Her heart was too full at the reopening of this old wound. The circumstance had brought back so vividly that never-to-be forgotten night, the memory of days too wretched to be borne. She was just beginning to put away all thoughts of

her former life. She was forgetting all wretchedness in her happy life with Beresford.

But he would not permit her to give herself up to gloomy meditations. Though badly unnerved by the shock of her news, all his thoughts were for her, and he endeavored to cheer her saddened spirits, dispelling all melancholy attendant upon the painful recollections.

By the day following she was something like her usual self again.

Many were the playful scenes enacted between them. Often Beresford teased her sorely only to provoke her to an exhibition of temper so that he might have the sweet felicity of forgiving her when she asked forgiveness for displaying anger.

He often hid her slippers for the sheer delight of seeing her fume and fuss in her endeavor to find them. He remained obdurate to her pleadings as to their whereabouts, making peremptory demands for her to kiss him until he bade her cease. Once she refused, being in no mood for such foolery. He retained the little black beaded slippers then, and she never saw them again.

CHAPTER XVI

They had been married a week, and the company's engagement in Chicago was drawing to a close.

One evening about dinner time Beresford returned to the hotel from a call at the theater with a large box in his hands. Lal eyed it curiously as he came into their room in high spirits and kissed her rapturously upon her eyes before he sought the sweetness of her lips.

"Just dying to know what it is, aren't you?" he said, as

she made a movement toward the bed where he had thrown his bundle.

"Of course. It's for me?"

"Clever girl! How did you know but what it was for some other woman? Guess what it is. I'll bet you can't."

"Something pretty—that's understood," she answered, as he unfastened the cords.

"The prettiest thing I've seen this winter. I couldn't resist it. I was passing Blank and Space's and saw it on view. It was drawing a crowd of fascinated women. You'd be a marked woman if you wore it out to a dinner party in Chicago."

He had loosened the wrappings and shook out before her delighted eyes an exquisite evening gown of lemon-colored peu de soie.

She gave a cry of admiration as he held up the nebulous folds shimmering under the light.

"Oh! Yale—Oh! Yale—" was all she could say, her sense of the beautiful and artistic thrilling with the richness of the gown.

"Trust a man for knowing the best in these things," he laughed; "come, get into it. I want to see how you'll look."

"What a price you must have paid! I saw this the other morning, and—"

"Hang the price! I'm attending to that. Here, off with that dark affair. Why do you hug such dark colors?"

He was unbuttoning her dress and hurrying her, breathless, into his recent purchase, his eyes glowing.

"How could you know it would fit? Why, it's perfect—"

"Of course it is. I know every measurement of your dear body, child. As soon as I saw it I said, 'That's her color,' and knew it would fit as soon as I got my hands on it. There! the last clasp. What endless hooks and eyes—Oh! you lovely. I've seen you at what I've thought your best, but I take it all back. Lal, you've looked positively beautiful in some things but you're irresistible in this. Dress adds wonderfully to you."

He kissed her on her bare shoulders and gazed delightedly at her.

"Thank you. Do you realize the ambiguity of that compliment? How can you have the hardihood to say such things in the face of this neck and these arms?"

"What's the matter with them?" he asked, bewildered.

"Well, if you can't see, certainly I shall not enlighten you."

He laughed.

"Oh, I see. Well, you never were much on shape. Don't you suppose a man can look for something else in a woman? You make me think of the silk on ripe corn."

"Are you color blind, Yale? This is lemon colored stuff. It is perfectly beautiful," and she gazed at the reflection the cheval glass cast.

"Whatever it is, it covers you and you are my all. Isn't that pretty? Say something as sweet to me, can't you? Do you think you love me the way I love you, darling?"

She looked at him a moment. Then she raised her arms and clasped them behind his neck, drawing his head down till their lips met and her eyes spoke into his.

"I love you more, I think, my dear one," she said; "this repression in me is forced. Some day this tide of feeling in me will sweep aside all restraint. You will know then whether I love you. You are everything to me. I've been cut adrift from the only one I ever cared for and I won't see her for some time to come. People often say it would kill them to lose someone dear to them. I wonder if it's true—"

"But you're not going to lose me, Lal. There is more to you than physical attraction. I love that mind of yours back of those eyes. I couldn't tire of you. Women like you have an intangible something back of them that winds around a man's heart-strings."

"You are in the first flush of your honeymoon, remember that," she said, as his hair mingled with her own.

"Hush! I believe you'd like to prophesy separation. My God! Lal, if it came to that, you'd be the one to break

this happiness, not I. Lose you?" he covered her face with eager kisses, "why, what are you thinking of?"

"Oh, I don't expect it," she answered, with wide opened eyes; "I'm not croaking. I haven't any presentiments or anything. Why shouldn't our two blended lives be one of the favored novelties of the world? Why—"

"It can. It shall be. After the violence of first passion subsides, love will creep in and grow to giant proportions and sweeten everything. Meanwhile—"

"Aren't you hungry?" She looked up to laugh at him, as the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half hour of 6.

"Since you remind me—yes. We'll go down now."

They went down to the dining-room. Few were there. But they had been seated only a few moments when Burton and Daisy Gaye came in. They seated themselves at one of the tables some distance from Lal and Beresford. Beresford nodded to them. Lal kept her gaze concentrated on her menu. Her husband's fine eyes were expressive of much.

"Burton's probably paying Daisy's bills now that Bertha Baker is an old story," he said; "I've known her for years and I don't think she ever knew the meaning of innocence."

"Don't say anything more about it. It makes my blood boil," replied Lal in low tones.

"Yet if either were in trouble you'd be the first on the scene to help them. You're as inconsistent a child as I ever knew. I never—Hello! what's the matter over there?"

He pushed back his chair at the same moment that Burton across the room had caught Miss Gaye as she swayed forward about to fall.

Lal put down her napkin.

"She's fainted, Yale. She may be ill. Go and see."

He left her, and a few minutes after she saw him help Burton carry the insensible woman from the table. The few in the dining-room began to discuss the occurrence, the waiters recovered from their surprise, and Lal waited for her husband's return.

But he did not come, and, unmindful now of food, she hurried out to seek him.

In the hall she saw him coming along from the antechamber next the parlors.

"What is it?" she asked, as soon as he reached her; "is she really ill?"

"She seems to be. She's unconscious. She has heart trouble, Burton says, and is subject to these attacks. I didn't know it."

"What will she do? I mean, who'll take her place to-night? They can't move her from here. She will—"

"Yes. Burton knows that. He's telephoned to a dramatic agency for some one to take the part. It's not much. Daisy'll stay here to-night. Burton's seen about a room for her and sent for a doctor."

"Poor thing! There isn't a soul to see to her. She'll need some one. I'll stay with her, Yale, till you come back from the theater. She—"

"But, my darling, one of the chambermaids will see that she's attended to. There's no necessity for you—"

"Yes, there is. No matter what she is, she's a woman, and it's my place to look after her. Don't argue, Yale, for I'm determined. Tell Mr. Burton, will you?"

"Lal, I object to your going near this woman. It isn't another case like Bertha Baker. Daisy is utterly without decency. It would be contamination for you to be in the same room with her," said Beresford decisively.

"We must disagree there, Yale. There can be no contamination when common charity is the chief factor in a case."

"Charity or not, Lal, I don't want you to go near her," said her husband shortly.

"Why?"

"For reasons I have just stated. I should think my wishes would be enough," he added, looking at her.

They were in the empty parlor now and the expression upon her face changed. She looked at him wistfully.

"I will do as you wish," she said gently. "I won't go near her unless she grows worse and needs me."

"It isn't likely. She will get all the attention she requires from others. Thank you for your concession, my darling. But I know what is best in these matters. I am only trying to save you."

"Save me?" she queried.

"Yes. From all that is impure and coarse. You haven't talked to the Gaye—to Daisy—as I have. I know what her oaths are like. She would just as soon rip out a string to you as to anyone."

"Oh, how terrible!"

"So you see what I've saved you. Now, kiss me good-bye. You love me? You're not angry because I objected?"

"No; only sorry for the moment. Love you? You know I do, my dear one."

Then he joined Burton to go to the theater and Lal, after trying to interest herself in playing upon the piano in the parlor, went to her room. Miss Gaye had been carried to a room, the physician had come and gone with the verdict of "Nothing serious; perfect quiet needed;" and an obliging chambermaid was sitting with the actress.

Before 9 o'clock, however, Lal, while finding much solace in writing in her journal, was disturbed by a rap at her door. Going to it, she saw the chambermaid standing outside.

"Will you come to Miss Gaye's room?" the woman asked. "She has asked to see you."

"Is she not feeling well?" queried Lal.

"She doesn't seem to be. Shall I tell her you'll come?"

For a moment Lal hesitated. Then she said:

"Yes. I'll be with her presently."

She stepped back into the room to get her smelling salts and her bottle of choice toilet water. With these she entered Miss Gaye's room. The chambermaid immediately withdrew.

Lal advanced to the bed whereon Miss Gaye had been laid and offered her smelling salts.

"I'm sorry you have been so indisposed. If there is anything I can—"

But the smelling salts had been pushed aside and Miss Gaye with apparent ease raised herself to a sitting posture.

"Indisposed! I'm a good actress, then, in spite of what Dad Childslea says. My God! but I didn't think I could fool you, though."

And she laughed a trivial, inconsequent laugh.

Lal rose with dignity.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake somewhere. I thought—"

"Thought I was sick, eh? Well, I was. Sick with a curiosity and dying to win my bet. So I fooled Charlie Burton and that fool of a Berry nicely. I—"

Revolted beyond measure, Lal exclaimed in deep scorn:

"Then it was a sham? You pretended—"

"Certainly. I knew your sympathies, but I suspected your morals. I made a bet with one of the men that your cold airs didn't last outside of the theater. And I was right—he! he!—you're no better than the rest of us."

She threw back her head and laughed maliciously.

"What do you mean?" asked Lal, trembling with indignation; "what are you implying?"

"What we all thought; now we know, or at least the others will when I tell them. Well, you're the best bargain Berry ever made in mistresses. You'll—"

"Stop!" commanded Lal, her face aflame; "how dare you insult me so? Is it so far beyond the conception of your mind and those of your companions to ascribe honorable motives to a man or woman connected with the stage? I should have reflected, though. We erred in not mentioning our marriage. Mr. Beresford and I were—"

"You don't mean to tell me you and Berry went through the farce of a ceremony, do you?" screamed Miss Gaye, with a peal of eldritch laughter. "Oh! my God! that's the best joke out! Married—married? Why, you piece of ridiculous ignorance, is bigamy marriage?"

"Bigamy? Are you raving? You are delirious," and Lal gazed at the woman.

"You don't believe it? It isn't a nice word to think about. But—mother of Christ! it's as true as death. Oh! your confidence is strong in him, I see. He's got a plausible tongue, Berry has. We all know it. But ask him where his wife is—ask him what became of Nathalie Wrenn? Ask him that and—watch him. Berry's a pretty good liar, but he can't lie out of that."

Lal caught the back of a chair, gasping:

"Is this a dastardly attempt to ruin our happiness? Or is it—merciful heaven! it can't be true!"

She went over to the bedside and shook the lounging figure till her own form trembled.

"Tell me, is it the truth? Is it the truth?" she demanded.

"Leave me alone. Of course it's the truth. Take your hands off," shaking herself free. "Don't be so dramatic. What's the matter with you anyway? Is it so unusual to find a man acting the part of a devil?"

She watched Lal's lithe figure as the girl paced up and down the room, her hand to her head. There was a look of sullen regret in her eyes as a dim consciousness of the wretchedness she had wrought began to force its way in her brain.

"How do you know this?" asked Lal from lips so dry as to make speech painful.

"I read the papers ten years ago, young as I was," was the reply. "Ask anyone who knew Berry then. You'll find plenty of people. How things worry you! It's rather tough, I must admit, thinking you're married and then find you've slipped up on the real thing. But now your reputation is gone, go in for what you can make. Stick to Berry as long as his cash holds out. When he's on his uppers give him the merry tra-la-loo and get ahold of some rich old fool in New York. Play him for a house. Your style wins an awful—"

But her listener had fled.

Once in her room, Lal stood still, her senses reeling.

"For God's sake," she cried aloud, "let me think. I must think. What has she been telling me? Is it true? She had no object in lying. Yale said himself he had known her a long time. Oh, my love, my love, it cannot be that you have deceived me."

She went over rapidly in her mind every moment she had passed with Beresford since meeting him in New York. She recalled the conversations she had had and turned hurriedly to her journals for her impressions of things at the time. She paused, her heart beating suffocatingly, her finger trembling upon the pages. Here, she found mentioned the fact of some expression noted upon Beresford's face during a certain conversation; there, she read the comment she had made when something he had said had puzzled her. She remembered how opposed he had been to her being with Daisy Gaye. Did he fear something might be said that would lead her to suspect?

She pressed her hands to her temples to keep from screaming. Could she doubt this man whose love she knew was irrevocably hers? Up and down she traversed the floor, talking to herself, trying to keep calm under the horrible pressure of tumultuous thought. She glanced at the clock. Only 10. Another hour of torture before he could come to end this frightful suspense.

Worn by the conflict of emotions called into action, she sat down and waited. It was with a superhuman effort she effected this control of herself.

And at 11 Beresford came.

CHAPTER XVII

She rose as he entered, standing by her chair tightly grasping the back of it. She was very pale and her hands were cold. But he did not notice anything unusual about her and went forward eagerly to take her to him. Then she drew back quickly, uttering one word:

"Wait!"

The expression upon her face stunned him and all he could do was to repeat after her, though interrogatively, that one word, fraught with so much meaning:

"Wait?"

"Yes, wait," said Lal, again, with a calmness which was not her own; "for I have heard things to-night which—oh! Yale, for God's sake, tell me it is a miserable, miserable lie!" she burst out, the pent-up feelings within refusing all restraint.

"What is it you have heard and where have you been?" asked Beresford, as a light sprang into his eyes.

"I—she sent for me—I thought—"

"Then you went to Daisy Gaye after all?"

He looked at her, but she returned his glance steadily.

"Yes, and she—"

"Did I not tell you I wanted to save you?" he questioned.

She recoiled another step with a gasp as of one dying by inches.

"Then it was true, true what she said?" she spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"What did she say?" replied Beresford, but the quiet of his tones did not ring true.

"That I was not your wife. That, that—great God! must you see me quiver and wince before you'll answer? Is it true?—is it true?"

He came nearer her and something in his eyes held her,

for she looked at him as one upon whom her salvation was staked. He put out a hand upon her shoulder and watched her eyes with their tense expression as they searched his face.

"My dear little girl, you only are my wife. You are more my wife than nine-tenths of the miserable women of the world who marry for position or money. I—"

She shrank from him.

"I know what you mean," she said in a low voice. "I am yours through love; we are married in the sight of God, but—legally, Yale, legally? Had you a right to give me your name? Would the law—"

She paused in her eager speech, for his brows had contracted.

"The law?" she reiterated.

"What is the law?" he replied. "I have heard you question it, Lal. And on such a subject as this—how can you care?"

"You are determined to evade me. I must speak as I dread to speak. Oh! the shame of it!—that I should be forced to ask you such a question. Were you—married—before—before—"

She dropped in the chair and covered her face with her hands, terrible sobs shaking her. He was on his knees beside her in an instant, drawing her hands away from her face.

"Don't, Lal, don't, for Christ's sake. You'll make a woman of me if you sob like that. Don't take it so hard, pet. You've done no wrong. The blame only rests with me. You won't be held accountable, so let conscience sleep. You blame me, and others will, too, perhaps, but I couldn't help it. I—"

She attempted to speak, but he would not permit her.

"I loved you as I have never loved a human being in my life. You appealed to my better nature, and God knows it needed it—something sweet and honest to keep it from decaying."

"And so you dishonored yourself and me for it," she said in stifled tones.

"Forgive me, darling. I could not let you go. Was it wrong to catch at this only chance of happiness I had ever had cross my life? And she—curse her—I meant to get a divorce after; I had ample grounds and—"

"It would have been the same. The sin would have been there," she said, but he went on quickly:

"It was so long ago, my marriage with her; only a few know, Daisy Gaye, young devil, and a handful of others—"

"And she—your wife?"

Lal's burning face lay against the velvet cushions hidden from his eyes.

"She was never my wife," Beresford said passionately. "I married her loving her as men do so many women for the perishable external which goes for so little. And not a month married before I knew of her perfidy. She had been the mistress of a rich Russian prince, tired of him, returned to this country, took to the stage and—captured me by her graces, her acquired accent, all her falseness that fooled more than one man. When I confronted her with my knowledge of her baseness, upbraiding her, what did she do? She laughed in my face in a perfect gale of merriment that I, of all men, should have been so duped. And then in a burst of bravado she boasted of her vile conquests since we had been married. I left her and the next day she eloped with Manalee of Hartley's company. That was Nathalie Wrenn, who was no more my wife than the worst wanton living."

"You gave her your name. You made your vows with her," was the reply in emotionless tones.

"But—"

"And giving her your name, pledging your vows to her, made our marriage," a bitterness crept into her voice, "a mockery."

"No mockery, Lal. The truest marriage ever consecrated," murmured Beresford, never letting go of her hands and now covering them with his kisses.

"Don't—don't," she implored. "Yale, do you realize this frightful position? Oh, how could you? How could you? I could never have deceived you as you have me."

"I shall make amends," he told her. "I will never leave you. You are as truly my wife as if no other had been. Can't you set opinion at defiance in this as you have done in so many other things? Listen to me, Lal. In three years we can accumulate enough to 'cut' the business and go to Europe. In Italy we can put everyone out of our lives and live only for each other. Nothing—"

She started up.

"Why do you tempt me? Can't you see it is all wrong? No, let me go, Yale, let me go. You never were my husband nor I your wife. Whatever the right or wrong on your side, however you are to be pitied or blamed, she is your wife and I—"

She had broken from his detaining grasp and was sobbing desperately.

"It is ten years since I have seen her," exclaimed Beresford hotly, going to her, "and seven months' absence is all that is needed for divorce. Do you realize that? You, who have always been so unconventional in your thoughts and actions, why are you so conventional now as to persist in saying she is my wife? She never was, I tell you. Lal, dear child, don't draw away from me like this."

She faced him with the courage of desperation gleaming in her eyes.

"Can't you understand? Don't you know you have taken from me something more than my good name? My self-respect has suffered at your hands, not the hackneyed thing that goes by that name, but the respect I have for that which is pure and honest in myself. Do you think I could go on living a lie with you? Do you think I can—"

"Lal! What do you mean? You are not going to—"

Beresford's face was white now, and he gazed at her unseeingly, as a man struggling against the fumes of chloroform.

"To leave you? There is nothing else to do. Our lives pursue separate paths now, Yale; you must see that."

"No, I don't see it," he burst out roughly; "and you can't make me. Leave me? Why, do you want to deal hell to both of us?"

"Better hell on earth than hell hereafter," she said.

"I think not. We're sure of the one. But you're not going to do this. I—"

"I am, Yale. I am determined."

"But I shall not allow you. Do you think I will let you trifle with our happiness?"

"You trifled with my honor. And, too, do you realize you have no authority over me? I am not your wife."

The bitterness of disgrace tinged her voice.

"Wife or no wife," said Beresford, in deep, shaken tones, "you are mine as you are no other's. Give in, Lal, give in. My love will atone."

"Honor only can atone in a case like this. This honor I ask from you now. Yale, leave me."

He saw the pathetic curve to her mouth, and the fatigue that enveloped her drooping figure, but he answered:

"I will not. You cannot make me leave you."

She straightened herself with a dignity not new to him, but which he had not had occasion to call into action toward him. Her yellow evening gown clung round her in soft folds as she advanced a few steps.

"If you cannot show me that courtesy, then I must seek another room myself," and she neared the door.

But he had anticipated her, barring her progress. His dark eyes grew dangerous as they traveled over her slight figure.

"This, too, I shall not permit," he said slowly.

"Yale!" she remonstrated. "You would not. Let me by."

"No. If you leave me I know it is forever. Do you think I'll let you go without a struggle?"

"You will not open that door for me? You will not let me go?" she questioned, looking at him steadily.

"Certainly not."

She saw the look of determination in his eyes and let her own fall for a moment.

"In that event I shall sit up all night. And if you touch me, I shall scream until somebody comes. Then I will tell all. I would not have thought it of you—that you could be so ungentlemanly."

She turned away, the pallor of her face deepening, a look of ineffable scorn in her eyes. Beresford sprang after her with an exclamation.

"You shall never say that of me," he said, catching a bit of the fleecy shawl that floated over her bare shoulders, and pressing it to his lips; "but think, only think, Lal, dear girl, to what you are condemning me. Don't leave me, for God's sake, don't leave me. Remember your love for me and mine—"

She shuddered.

"Do you think I can endure much more? Don't touch me," as he endeavored to draw her to him, thinking she was weakening. "Don't touch me, Yale—and go."

She leaned against the mantelpiece as though summoning strength.

Beresford, white to the lips, fell back.

"I'll go," he said. "You shall not be disturbed to-night. If you will remember, though, earlier this evening I said if it came to separation, you'd be the one to break this happiness, not I. Never forget that. Remember you have thrown love under foot and are trampling him to death."

"So that honor may live, Yale."

She gave him a look he never forgot from the deep shadows of her eyes. He put his hand a moment to his own, started to speak, checked himself and, seeing her head bent upon her breast, turned away.

When she looked up again she was alone.

CHAPTER XVIII

Before dawn Lal had packed the things which were peculiarly her own in her trunk, putting aside everything of any value Beresford had ever given her. Some beautiful jewels he had bought her just after their engagement she locked in a little steel safe he carried in his trunk and replaced it carefully as she had found it.

Her dresses, all bought with her own money save the exquisite evening gown he had purchased only the evening before, she folded and packed away. The other she laid upon the bed, bending over its delicate folds as tenderly as over a loved one. It gave her a wrench of actual pain to bid the dainty thing good-bye. She felt it was human. It had been a dumb participant of her last hours of happiness, her first hours of misery. She felt as if parting from a friend. Oh, if she could only take it with her into the life that was to be so empty now! But never would she touch a gift of his again, bought with his money that had supplied her wants when the right to it had never been hers.

In her traveling suit of quiet gray she crept down to the office. It was almost 5 o'clock and the night clerk was yawning his head off. He stared as Lal approached his desk. She had on her hat and gloves.

"I wish to pay my week's bill here," she said. "Mr. Beresford and I have had a difference and I am leaving this morning."

The clerk began to smile, but a look from her eyes checked any predisposition to impertinence.

"A bad day for a journey," he said, as he handed her the receipted bill, looking out through the windows at the heavy atmosphere.

"Yes. Please send a porter up for my trunk. I want to catch the 5:30 express."

How she ever made that journey from Chicago to New York Lal never knew. Once out of the city which had been the scene of her greatest happiness, she gave herself up to the utter misery that seemed to take complete possession of her. Her mind appeared dazed at times when the full significance of the terrible truth burst upon her.

Without position, without husband, she was alone in the world, almost worse off than she had been at the beginning; with no prospects in view; with but a few hundred dollars in ready money, she was to begin again at the very beginning. Her mind reviewed all the events of the past months. She dwelt with morbid persistency on her courtship days and her marriage morning. How happy she had been and how perfect had been the prospect of her future life with Beresford. And then through her mind there flashed the remembrance of the Sonata.

"The palmist's daughter was right," she said to herself; "each time I heard it I was in peril and never heeded. The first time, when Yale told me he loved me, and he had no right to—the second, when we were married. Married?"

She closed her eyes and clenched her hands as the mockery of the word obtruded itself. Had he, the man she loved, repented the part he had played? Was it only the loss of her he mourned or had shame for his act overtaken him? Not yet, surely. Repentance rarely comes in a moment. A train of thought was started and she looked absently out at the flying landscape as her thoughts ran along.

Must we first taste the keenness of punishment before we can truly repent? Do people repent because they suffer? Or because the love of right asserts itself? Rarely the latter. If it is possible that we may be accorded a chance to repent in the next world after realizing a loss, will not that repentance be regarded as sincere as if it had occurred on earth? Is there not then a chance for the worst of sinners after he has been judged?

But with Beresford an early or late repentance made no difference except so far as moral obligation was concerned.

She should never see him again, never—except—but things like that did not happen. The woman would live on. They always did in real life.

At times she felt she must give up, that her burden of sorrow was greater than she could bear. Without him the blackness of night was over all. Life seemed over and done with. Youth seemed of the past, though she was only twenty-one. He had been so much of her life. Gone from her now, what was there left to do? Then she would draw herself together with an effort. There was still art to work for. Art was a true mistress. She never played one false when honest servitude was rendered her. She would turn to her work again and devote her life to it, forgetting the past.

But how to get work in her chosen profession at this time of the season? All the way to New York she reviewed the subject, pondering deeply. The only thing to do was to apply to a dramatic agency, and she was unskilled in such things. But there were the managers. She had read of girls taking their courage in hand and interviewing managers. That was what she must do, regardless of the fact that a manager would probably give her a curt dismissal, if she were so fortunate as to see him, for even daring to expect anything in the middle of the winter.

She would not go to her former boarding house after an experience that had cost her so dear. Instead, she hunted up a moderate priced locality and in a little hall bedroom took up her lodging. She lost no time in setting out in pursuit of employment. She was quite conversant with the names of the reputable theatrical managers in New York. Making a mental list of those she intended interviewing, she began her rounds.

It was dreadful uphill work. At almost every place when she asked to see the manager she was told unblushingly he was out of town. Her inquiries met with studious politeness in some instances, but more often brusque indifference was what she received. Manager after manager she failed to

see and she shrank back abashed at the curt treatment. Then she read herself a lecture as she walked along Broadway.

"If I don't arm myself with a little of the brassiness so apparent in the profession, I'll never make headway," she said to herself. "Surely if I want to be an actress I ought to be able to play the part of a pushing, stirring woman for a little while."

So with a new demeanor she entered the Monarch Theater, and to the boy in buttons stated that she wished to see Mr. Throwall.

"Mr. Throwall is out," said the boy imperturbably, turning away from her with the air of one who has dismissed the subject.

"See here," Lal exclaimed with asperity, "I've heard that before. You know you're telling me a lie. Here is my card; take it to him if you don't want to lose your position."

She handed him a card on which her professional name, Margaret Dare, was engraved. With a slight alteration of manner the boy vanished.

In ten minutes he returned, saying, "Step this way, please."

Up the elevator, through a long bare hall, till an inner one, heavily carpeted, was reached. There he left her and she went forward a few steps and was confronted immediately by Throwall, the great theatrical magnate, a veritable Napoleon of the stage.

His keen eyes seemed to grasp her capabilities in an instant. He smiled as he made a formal acknowledgment of her interrogative, "Mr. Throwall?" and motioned her to a chair.

"You succeeded in impressing Neddy. A rare thing for him. Have you come to try to impress me?" he asked quizzically, glancing at her card, which lay before him on his desk.

"To be honest, yes I have, Mr. Throwall. I am des-

perate. I must get something to do. I want you to help me. I am sure I can fit in somewhere in one of your many organizations."

"You ought," said Throwall, regarding her speculatively. "But do you realize you have come at a time when everything is filled for the season?"

"Yes, I know that, but if I wait I will starve. I haven't been in the profession long enough to appeal to the Actors' Fund. I am alone. Can't you—won't you—"

"You've been playing with Childslea, I see," said Throwall, referring to her card again. "He disciplines well, but—he is a monstrosity. He threw you out for no cause at all, I presume? He always does."

"I had done nothing to merit his treatment," Lal answered in a low voice. "He was most ungentlemanly."

"I understand. There's promise in you, young woman. I saw you act one night recently in Chicago. I'll give you a chance. But I have nothing now." Lal's face fell. "Oh! but you won't have long to wait. In three weeks I am going to start rehearsals for a road company in the melodrama I brought out last year—er—'The Lellow Gorse.' I'll cast you for a small part in that. But it will be the hardest kind of work, I promise you."

Grateful beyond expression, Lal's face spoke for her. But she managed to utter a few words of thanks, learned when to make her appearance, and where, and left the office with a much lighter heart than when she had entered.

In the three weeks interim she was not idle. She felt her only salvation from insanity was work. When she thought of Beresford it seemed certain she would give way to her terrible grief. That was the hardest part—to put him completely out of her life as if he had never been. It was worse than useless. The personality of the man she loved was too insistent and powerful to be eradicated in a few weeks or even months. She thought of him a hundred times a day, of their hours of happiness together, of his half tender, half

rough manner of caressing her, of the delight he took in her hair when with an impetuous movement he would release it from its confines of hairpins and shaking it free in a sparkling shower, bury his face and hers in its perfumed masses. It was agony to think of it all, and in desperation she would close her eyes and press her hands against her forehead as if to beat out memory.

When work really began in the form of rehearsal for the melodrama, Lal welcomed it as the traveler welcomes the oasis in the desert. She threw herself into her part with such energy as to startle the others, arousing the apprehension of the leading woman, whose long years of stage life caused her to remark, as she glanced at Lal, that "she was one of the kind who waited for chances and when they came knew how to take 'em."

It was the hardest kind of work, as Mr. Throwall had assured her. From 10 till 6 each day for a month they rehearsed the piece, and though Lal felt the relief from such horrible wearing and ravings as it had been her lot to bear when with Childslea, she did not escape many rough and disagreeable experiences. The stage manager, in direct contrast to Mr. White, was a bullying fellow, with leering eyes for the women and swearing ones for the men. Often the two expressions combined were for the women.

Heretofore a stranger to policy, Lal endeavored to call into play a little of it, so as not to antagonize her companions. But she shunned the men with a persistency that could not escape notice. She was let alone for awhile.

The wife of the business manager, who had been an actress but had retired, attended rehearsal one morning, took a fancy to Lal and was kind to her in many ways. The night before the company started on the road Mrs. Manton with her husband invited Lal to dine with them.

It had been an unusually wearisome day and the fatigue of the month's constant rehearsing had told on the girl. She looked years older than she did the few months before when

she had left Nineveh with ambition and hope stirring in her heart. It was not alone the rehearsing. The latent fires of a buried passion kept their deathless vigils back of her eyes. A life's history had already written itself with sorrow's unrelenting fingers upon her face.

"What a sad face you have for one so young, Miss North," observed Mrs. Manton, after the party of three had seated themselves at a table in a recess of the brilliantly lighted dining-room of the H—— House; "hasn't she, Neal?" appealing to her husband.

"Yes, I've noticed it. But though it may be from some unfortunate experience, it is an excellent factor in the things that make for an actor's success. We love what mystifies or piques us. When Miss North is famous the sadness of her face will be her chief charm to many."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Lal with fervor.

"Oh, but it will be so," Mrs. Manton broke in. "How interesting a sad face is to all of us. You must admit that. Why, think what a field it is for an imaginative person. I've no doubt many of the great writers have received inspirations time and again from looking upon a sad face."

"Sometimes grease paint and the proper lines on an actor's face will give the effect of sadness," said Mr. Manton. "Why, there's Childslea, for instance. On the street you wouldn't look at that man twice; yet he can make up to have the face and expression of a man who has suffered much."

"And he probably makes other people suffer more," remarked his wife. "Such a brute as that man is. I knew a man who played with him once, one of these great, broad-shouldered fellows, handsome and deep voiced, with the close-shaven hair showing blue under the skin—you know the type, don't you?"

"Yes," answered Lal, in a low voice, "I know."

"Well, the first year he was playing with Childslea he was new to the pleasant terms Childslea employs to his play-

ers and when the beast launched forth in a tirade against some women in the company, Berry thundered right out—oh! you know, Berry? Charming fellow, isn't he?—"

"Very," from Lal, in tones that might have meant anything.

"Well, as I said, Berry yelled right out, 'Mr. Childslea, you're a cad, a brute of the very first magnitude!' and walked right out of the theater. It was at rehearsal. I knew a young woman in the company, too. She said there was the deadest kind of a silence and then Childslea turned to the company and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, am I a brute?' And of course nobody answered. They couldn't say 'yes,' and they wouldn't say 'no.' "

"And Mr. Beresford?" questioned Lal, with an admirable assumption of indifference.

"Oh, he was taken back. That's the way with men of Berry's charm. They're always taken back whatever they do."

"Are they?"

"Oh, yes. And Childslea's always been fond of him—at least, grateful. Berry's mother once—oh, you know the story."

The concealed orchestra above them was playing on stringed instruments the negro melody Lal loved and which brought back the remembrance of the afternoon she had spent with the company in Childslea's car. How long ago it seemed! And yet how painfully vivid the recollection. Would she ever be able to vanquish these thoughts?

She picked up the musical program from the table to distract her mind. As her glance fell upon the selections to be rendered she uttered an exclamation causing Manton and his wife to look at her.

"How is it possible to disbelieve in Fate?" said Lal, as she laid down the program. "There are some things certainly beyond our control and yet which surely are not ordained by a higher Power, so trifling must they seem."

"What do you mean?" asked Manton, picking up the program and scanning it.

Lal rested her head on her hand.

"What is the sixth selection?" asked she, nodding at the card he held.

"The Moonlight Sonata. L. von Beethoven. What is there unusual about that?" And he looked at her.

"Nothing. Only it has followed me everywhere. I have never heard it but what some danger or something not desirable threatened me. What is to be to-night, I wonder. It's the next piece."

"Why, child, you're more than fanciful," said Mrs. Manton. "I believe in Fate, but pieces of music don't hold one's destiny."

"The Sonata has controlled mine," Lal's voice was not quite steady.

"Nonsense," uttered Manton with a laugh. "This is beyond the boundary of superstition. You're morbid."

"I hope not," replied Lal. "Morbid people give one the chills. Don't be afraid," to Mrs. Manton; "I'm not going to be hysterical or anything of that kind. But I have a frantic desire to see the outcome of this. I must wait and watch."

"By all means," said Mrs. Manton. "I'm as curious as you. There! They've stopped playing. It's the next, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Lal's voice was audible, but she spoke with an effort.

When the Sonata began she kept her eyes fixed upon the center of the table while the waiter removed the dishes preparatory to dessert. But when the melody progressed she raised her eyes from their set stare. The dining-rooms were filling. All sorts and conditions of men and women were coming through the wide doorway some distance removed from them.

Presently a lady and gentleman came in, pausing on the threshold waiting for the head-waiter to assign them places.

The lady was fair and rather plump, with a quantity of hair that crinkled round her brows. Her escort was a hearty looking young fellow in the undress uniform of a naval officer.

One glance at them caused Lal to shrink behind Mrs. Manton's ample form. In an agony of apprehension she whispered:

"Oh! I wouldn't have them see me for the world. They're—they are—people from my old home and I made a promise, a resolution to myself that I'd never see them again till I had amounted to something. I—"

"They can't see you. This pillar hides us. Besides, they're not looking this way," was Mrs. Manton's reassuring answer.

When satisfied she was safe from possible observation Lal eagerly peered between the hanging foliage drooped in fancy arches about them.

"Peggy! Dear little Peggy!" she murmured. "She hasn't changed a bit. She looks well—and happy. Why, Howell has on a uniform. What can he possibly be doing? It must be something lucrative. They wouldn't be dining here otherwise. What is she saying to him? How her eyes shine at him."

She watched breathlessly the unconscious Peggy lean forward across the table to her husband. She seemed drawing his attention to something on the musical program. Howell nodded and smiled. But Lal, watching, saw over his wife's face steal a shadow.

"She remembers," murmured Lal; "we heard this same haunting melody the night father died, the night I met Yale. She is thinking of me, I know it, I feel it. Poor Peggy! Not to let you know. But it is better this way. Not yet a while, not yet. When I have won my way, Peggy, when I can say truly Fame has given me one little laurel leaf. Till then—you have Howell."

CHAPTER XIX

Three years is not a great while, but that it is sufficient time wherein the word change can be spelled in capital letters is a fact known to many. Change, in ourselves during the space of three years, rarely, if ever, is noticed by ourselves. It takes others to see what we have failed to observe. Of course a physical change is much more discernible than an inward one. We may go on, unconscious of the story being written upon our faces, guided as that story is by the fingers of the soul. Others see suddenly and are shocked or delighted at what we have been oblivious to, so subtle a marker is Time to us, individually.

Three years had done much for Lal. But she did not know it. At twenty-four she was an old young woman, her mind broadened by experiences of many kinds, not embittered as so many are after passing through the ordeals to which they have been subjected. When a great grief makes us look upward instead of inward, forward instead of backward, it has not visited us in vain. Good springs from evil occasionally. From a bitter sorrow there can rise, sphinx-like, a quiet happiness.

Lal had not buried her love for Beresford. Instead, it had remained with her with agonizing insistence, permeating her daily life at first, after she had left him, creeping into her art and unconsciously ennobling the serious roles she assumed. But the fact that she had remained true to her love of purity, her idea of right, sustained her during the first fearful months of separation.

Once only had she heard from him. Not that he had given her up as irretrievably lost to him. She knew from various sources how he not only had her ever in his mind, but was always on the lookout for her as he went with his company from city to city. She felt this course of his, and

as soon as she learned of it as a fact she never lost herself for a moment.

When the company with which she traveled reached a city her very first move was to ascertain what other companies were in town. Beresford had not left Childslea, and Lal's attention to the movements of his company were keen indeed. Only once had her ingenuity to elude Beresford gone almost for naught.

In Cincinnati, some weeks after she had left him in Chicago, it so happened that Childslea's company and that of "The Yellow Gorse" played simultaneous engagements.

Lal and her companions arrived at Cincinnati in a pouring rain one Sunday morning. Two hours later when she had engaged a room in a theatrical boarding house, Mrs. Manton, who was with her, prior to joining her husband at the hotel, remarked casually that Childslea's company was to play Cincinnati that week, too.

Dumfounded that what she had so long dreaded had actually come to pass, Lal could only look blankly at her informant. Unconscious of the import of the news she had communicated, Mrs. Manton wandered off into stories of her own stage days wherein many of those now playing with Childslea had figured.

And not an hour after, when the manager's wife had seen Lal comfortably settled and gone her way, the frowsy servant stumbled up to the room to announce that there was a gentleman below to see Miss North. But Lal suspected, and would not go down. Message after message the obliging maid, inspired by silver coin and dark eyes, carried from the parlor floor to Lal's bedroom.

But her trips were in vain and a very thunderous looking man paced the main floor. Lal, sitting in her room with fingers tightly interlaced together, waited to hear the front door close. But the sound she awaited with such nervous tension did not come. Instead, back for the fifth time came slavey, bent on winning for the owner of the speaking eyes.

"It is Mr. Beresford 'm. He says he must see you.

Won't you take pity on 'im, Miss? He wants to see you mighty badly."

"I will not see him," said Lal, with such determination in her voice that the girl turned away instantly, subdued. "Wait, though," as after an instant's hesitation she approached a table; "you may take him this note."

Sitting down she wrote briefly:

"You know as well as I that it is impossible for us two to ever meet again. I would not see you, loving you as I do, for a world of happiness. Do not attempt to see me again. You will fail. If you ever loved me you will forget me."

Giving this to the gaping maid, she quickly sent her away.

Then she sat down, after locking the door, and tried to stifle the clamor within her. How hard it had been for her to deny herself even one look at the dear face she, only, knew. It was terrible to think they were as widely separated as if death had stepped between. But she was happy in the victory over self. She would not yield to the warring impulses within, the most sinister one of which kept whispering to her to throw all restraint to the winds, she was only ruining her own peace.

She sat there an hour with strained face and burning brow, struggling to exult in her moral victory and drown the cries in her soul for Beresford. It was poor work and her misery needed no addition to make it complete. But when, an hour later, a letter was pushed under her door, after no reply to repeated knocks, Lal knew that a final tug at her heartstrings lay in the missive lying so innocently on the floor.

She could not quite bring herself to destroy it unread, though, she argued with herself, that was what she should do. Her heart was hungry for some message from him. The days without him had been unbearable. So she read it, her eyes filling, her throat aching at the inexpressible pathos enveloping it all. Beyond a doubt Beresford loved her and was daily undergoing torment without her.

He dwelt on what they had been to each other, the unspeakable anguish of separation, implored her to return to him, that she might do so now with propriety and let him right her in the eyes of the world, for he had gotten a divorce from the woman who had wrecked his life. He could make reparation now, and was longing to do so. But this phase of the letter did not move Lal. Divorce to her was as heinous a transgression as any other offense. She felt she would no more be Beresford's wife than she had been before.

In anguish of mind she burned the letter, ignoring the prayer for a reply. This appeal from him had started to throbbing afresh the mortal wound she had received from him. What he had done could not extinguish her love for him, and she must live on knowing him to be free and yet not free for her, a loving, sinning man who could and would not be put out of her thoughts.

All this had been three years ago. Never again from that wet Sunday morning in Cincinnati to this bright day of early spring had she heard from him or of him.

Four months with "The Yellow Gorse" company had terminated her experience in melodrama. She was transferred to another of Throwall's many road companies with a few of her late associates. A society drama was to make a tour of the small cities. It failed, and a hurry rehearsal was called for another play. A season of ill luck seemed to fall to the share of this company, for this last play was equally unfortunate. Throwall commanded their return to New York and, separating the players, assigned them to different organizations.

Lal was placed with Wade and Lewis in their Shakesperian productions and her mind was kept charged to its fullest capacity by the roles she was called upon to memorize. Aside from her own parts, she was told to understudy the leading woman. In eight months she was familiar with the lines of most of Shakespeare's heroines, ready to jump into the leading woman's place at a moment's notice.

But that opportunity did not come and the season was gotten through miserably, Lal waiting for chances that never presented themselves.

But Throwall kept her in mind. The three years' knocking about the country had given her what she craved—experience. She had mastered the technical side of acting. When she was assigned a part in the play presented by the home company the following season she did not fall short of her manager's expectation. She created an impression, and to one who realizes how hard that is to do in these days of competition, it must be admitted a great bound forward had been taken.

But Lal had not found her right place yet.

Just after the season opened Throwall, in one of his impulsive freaks, organized a stock company for Shakesperian productions in New York.

"Othello," "Much Ado About Nothing," "Macbeth" and "Hamlet" were to be given. And to Lal's transcendant joy she was to play "leads." The week prior to opening night was one of feverish anticipation to her. It seemed her chance had come at last. If she could but gain the critics' favor the hardest part of her struggle would be over. The horrors of the road were relegated to the background for the present.

She pushed aside, as inconsequent, all thought of failing strength. She had noticed her inability to endure as she had endured the fatigue of the long and trying hours of rehearsals. But her unbridled ambition would not permit her to give a moment's thought to run-down nerves. True, she had fainted at rehearsal one morning, but it was only the outcome of excitement and a summer's season of unremitting hard work. She had rallied enough to go on with her part and relieve the minds of her associates. But sometimes we do not receive many warnings. Nature thinks she has done her part when she raises her finger twice or thrice.

However, Lal's debut as leading woman in a company playing in the metropolis was made admirably. Beyond a

necessary hitch or two to give the piece significance all was as smooth as could be desired.

She sent out the following morning for all the newspapers. Trembling, she went through the criticisms before she started out for rehearsal. It was "Macbeth" that had been given the night before and the critics dealt mercilessly with the presentation. No one escaped. The scoring was most emphatic and entire. As for Margaret Dare, who had been daring enough to essay the role of Lady Macbeth, "words," according to one critic, "were not adequate to express the profound indignation of lovers of the drama for a management that would foist such a slim, untutored girl upon them, to attempt to portray this most magnificent and mature of Shakespeare's women." "Miss Dare has had training, that is evident," still another of these autocrats of the press proclaimed, "but that she is woefully lacking in her portrayal of this part is most apparent. Breadth of style and maturity of power are nowhere in her grasp yet. We are glad to know the bill for the week is varied so that we may have an opportunity to judge her, not by one, but by a number."

Lal sat stunned by this rude awakening from her dream of favorable criticism. She had realized when rehearsing Lady Macbeth her inability to cope with the larger demands of the character, but had struggled along, doing her best. And when one has done one's level best, what more can be said?

But the critics do not judge by such a standard. They condemn even the attempt. A more unjust lot of men does not tread the earth. With just one exception, the men employed by the New York newspapers to give their honest opinions of plays and players, are men utterly indifferent to what they say of the unfortunate professionals whom they can, in a measure, make or mar, so long as *their* individuality shines forth like a beacon light, so long as it is *their* style which attracts the eye and keeps the reader entranced by the flippant, catch-penny bid they make for cheap adula-

tion. Self, self, self! It is found in all professions, among all classes; it is the cry that rings out above every other from this hurrying, pushing, nineteenth century humanity. But nowhere does it stalk in such bald effrontery as among the dramatic critics.

Hurrying around to the theater, Lal was met by a perfect storm of execrations from the indignant actors who stood around in a more or less frantic state of wrath, reading aloud the criticisms from the morning's papers. No one could hear his neighbor, but all joined in the babel of tongues denouncing the whole band of critics.

"Just listen to this beast of a Lance Johnson," shouted "Baldie" Ferris, whose Macduff had been riddled to pieces by the airy grapeshot of the *Financial Exponent's* dramatic expert; "he says, 'As for Ferris' Macduff, the like ne'er walked even in the distorted world of dreams. Not in the lines of the original play, not in the lines he speaks, is there any justification for his doings. He plays, the whole evening, a sort of "Simon-Says-Wig-Wag" in which the object is to do the opposite of what Simon tells you to do.' The young jackanapes! If I had him here—"

"It isn't as pathetic a scoring as we get in the old *Steadfast*. Springer, in that, simply ignores us," said Ned Norcross, scanning the columns of another paper blackly. "Springer's rabid, anyway. Can't find any good in anyone except Rohan. He's daffy about her."

"This woman freak who writes for the *Howler* has got in her little say, too. Bah! she makes me sick," said little Fleetwood.

And so the wrathful remarks ran high until Mr. Manton appeared and summed up the general feeling in a varied assortment of expressive epithets, and the male contingency of the company felt better.

But that night "Othello" was given and the following morning's criticisms were a little less fiery in their scorching. But the lack of encouragement froze the blood in Lal's veins. It weighed like a pall upon her and she fought

against collapse with mad energy, as one who fights against a mortal sickness. Mr. Throwall's disappointed face as he came round to the theater the third night, when "Hamlet" was to be given, was like a reproach to her.

She knew the week would be gotten through, but she dreaded the termination. While not resting the entire responsibility of the company's success, or otherwise, upon her shoulders, Throwall had expected more from her and she had been unable to meet the expectation. What was it? What was there that seemed lacking in her acting? Why did she often feel as if great weights held her down and would not let her go on?

She endeavored to throw off her fast gathering depression as she entered her dressing-room that night. She took heart as she saw the costume of white silk for the fourth act, fresh from the costumer's hands, hanging from a hook.

"It is beautiful," she said to the dresser, fingering the soft folds. "I had one like it once, home, only this is far more exquisite. What's the house like, Mrs. Fernell?"

"Very good, miss. Mr. Manton was in here a few moments ago. He said there are several theater parties in front. The boxes are all taken but one or two. You haven't enough rouge on, miss, if I may make bold to say. You're awful pale to-night. Touch that eyelash just a little. There! That's enough. Won't you take a glass of something if I get it? You'll be better for it."

"Oh, no, no," said Lal, "I'm all right. I don't want anything. Help me into this costume, please," and she indicated the one she wore in the first act.

When she came out in the wings Throwall looked at her critically.

"The critics are out in full force again to-night. You look well. Can't you throw a little more animation into your acting?"

"I'll try, sir," was Lal's meek reply.

"Try, and succeed. You've fallen off this week. That won't do, you know."

"I know," Lal murmured; "I will redeem myself tonight."

"You can. This is pre-eminently a man's play, and Ophelia is well-nigh subordinate, but you can get in some fine work in the fourth act—your mad scene."

"Yes, I shall. I shall, sir. You'll not be disappointed, I promise you."

Throwall moved away and Lal, as she waited for her cue, saw him in conversation with the stage manager. They both glanced in her direction from time to time. It made her nervous and miserable, but she did not allow it to affect her acting. She made her entrance with an outward composure that was admirable.

Just after the curtain had gone up on the third act a party of four, two ladies attended by two gentlemen, entered the lower right-hand box and settled themselves quietly to watch the play. But their late entrance had attracted attention and many were the opera glasses leveled at the occupants of the box.

One of the ladies seemed to feel keenly the attention they had attracted, and for some little while was noticeably embarrassed, though she tried to concentrate her mind on what was being enacted before her.

The play within the play was in progress. The central characters were grouped about the stage watching the scene Hamlet conjures for the torture of his mother and his uncle.

Lal did not know then that one of the ladies in the recently occupied box glanced at her program as Lal delivered her line, in answer to Hamlet:

"You are as good as a chorus, my lord."

Nor did she see the lady whisper something to the gentleman beside her. He raised his brows and shook his head, and the lady looked again at the stage. But Lal did not see anything of this. She rarely looked at her audience. Tonight she was bent upon retrieving herself. She went through her part with poetic grace and with Hamlet won a curtain call at the close of the act.

Throwall met her outside her dressing-room as she was going down for the fourth act. He uttered an exclamation as the full beauty of what she impersonated spread through his intelligence.

Her hair hung about her like a burnished cloud, each strand glinting with light. Intertwined were rosemary, rue, fennel and columbine. Her face was quite pale. She had removed her rouge. She was as pathetic a figure as the mind can imagine. Throwall's face expressed his admiration plainly.

"You'll take 'em with this costume," he said; "you've got the physique, the face for the part. I've a good mind to have an oil painting of you in this. It would be a feature of the Monarch's foyer."

She smiled as she nodded to the call boy who had paused at the stair landing, seeing her in the passage-way.

"There's my call," she said; "I'll talk to you later about the portrait. Perhaps you won't care about it if the critics mangle me to-morrow."

"They can't do that without perjuring themselves forever," he said, as they went down together; "they're a dastardly lot, but if they can't see merit in your Ophelia tonight, I'll eat my hat. Now go in—and win. This is your best scene."

Her cue came and she went on with her opening lines:

> They bore him bare faced on the bier;
> Hey no nonny, nonny, hey nonny;
> And in his grave rained many a tear—
> Fare you well, my dove!

Laer.—Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge. It could not move thus.

Oph.—You must sing, Down-a-down, and you call him a-down-a. Oh! how the wheel becomes it! It is the false steward that stole his master's daughter.

Laer.—This nothing's more than matter.

She crossed the stage chuckling her little insane laugh and strewing flowers about her, offering them to Laertes.

Oph.—There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you love remember; and there is pansies; that's for thoughts.

Her voice faltered at the words, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance." But she recovered herself quickly and went on. There was a movement in the box at the right and a lady was leaning forward, intently gazing at the mad Ophelia. The gentleman at her side was inspecting his program with contracted brows.

Lal was enwrapped in her part. Her voice in all its musical richness replied to Laertes' comment:

Oph.—There's fennel for you, and columbine—there's rue for you; and here's some for me—there's a daisy—I would give you some violets—but they withered all when my father died—they say—they say—they say—

Good Heavens! had she forgotten her lines? Or was she going mad? Or was she dead and had she awakened in another world?

In recrossing the stage her eyes had been caught by the occupants of Box A. Her fascinated gaze seemed riveted to them. She made a final effort, repeating vaguely the words, "They say—" and paused, helpless. She heard the voice of the prompter, "They say he made a good end—" but it seemed to come from afar off.

Then the embarrassed attention of the audience left her drooping figure, for something surely unprecedented was occurring in the box.

A fair, frightened looking little woman had sprung to her feet, and with hands piteously outstretched toward that slender, white-robed figure on the stage had uttered one cry that had rung from pit to proscenium arch. One agonized cry of "Lal!" that thrilled the audience as nothing had thrilled them that night, and in a moment more I verily believe the blond lady would have been over the railing of the box and on to the stage had not the gentleman at her side drawn her back.

But Lal's arms were extended, too, and as Peggy's voice

rang through the theater she dropped them limply, and before the dumfounded stage manager could collect his senses to signal down the curtain, Ophelia had fallen prone at the feet of Laertes.

CHAPTER XX

For me, Margaret Hope, familiarly known to a few as Peggy, the end of the world seemed at hand. The very thought that my weary waiting, my ceaseless but ineffectual search, had resulted in this accidental finale to my quest, was a mental paralysis. No thought of my extravagant public exhibition worried me. No thought at all, but one, great and overwhelming, obtruded itself in my brain. How to get to Lal before she was spirited away beyond my reach? It must be done, and at once.

In my excitement I had crowded to the back of the box, sobbing dry sobs of hysterical joy, clinging to Howell as he strove to calm me. Our friends, Mr. and Mrs. Thorpe, joined us, looking bewildered, as well they might.

"Control yourself, Peggy. Everyone is looking at us," Howell said, as the loud murmurs of an audience very much exercised penetrated to the furthermost recesses of our box; "are you sure this actress is Lal? It seems impossible. She—"

"Sure it is Lal?" I exclaimed indignantly; "I could stake my life on it. How could I make a mistake where she is concerned? Why, did you see her hair, Howell? Did you see her hair?"

"Yes. It was Lal's hair, and she seemed to know you. She—"

"Yes, yes. She held out her arms; did you see her, Howell? Did you—Oh, take me to her. We are losing time. My poor girl! She looked ill, frightfully ill. Oh, to think of it all, to think of it all! Take me to her, Howell; take me to her."

"I'll call an usher," said Mr. Thorpe, observing Howell's look of perplexity.

But two had already reached our box. They were not looking very pleasantly at us. I could not wait for anyone to attend to matters for me.

"How can I see Miss North?" I asked hurriedly of these callow looking youths; "I must—"

"There ain't no Miss North that I know of," answered one of them; "wasn't you the lady that was just now the cause of the curtain bein' rung down?"

"Yes. I know that young girl who is playing Ophelia. I must see her. She is a relative I lost—"

But the disagreeable fellow was shaking his head.

" 'Tain't allowed. We—"

"But you must," said Howell sternly, as I turned appealingly to him; "this lady is a sister to Miss North—Miss Dare as the program says. She—"

"Hush," Mrs. Thorpe said suddenly; "they're making an announcement from the stage. Some one is speaking."

The four of us leaned eagerly forward. A stout, bald-headed man was speaking.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he was saying; "please do not be disturbed at the unfortunate occurrence just witnessed. Miss Dare is quite well enough to continue her part in the next act, though she appears only as a corpse. It is her wish that the last act be given, so if you will please remain seated the tragedy will continue."

"Tragedy!" I cried in agonized undertones; "it is one, indeed. Howell, dear Howell, don't you see they're lying? If they bring her on the stage again it will be unknown to her. Lal's not the fainting kind, and when she gives up it means something. Oh, I'm going to get out of this."

I caught up my wrap and hurried from the box, knowing full well that Howell was behind me. To my left I turned blindly, back of the box, plunged down three or four little steps and was brought to a standstill by a door that looked ominously unyielding.

I turned the handle, but it would not open. I shook it furiously. Then I pounded on it with both my fists. Howell joined me. But our united efforts were productive of nothing; nothing but the hastening to our side of the two ushers who had retired when we had turned our attention to the stage again.

"Say, this won't do, lady. You're disturbin' the audience," began one, but Howell cut in:

"If you must be bribed, here is a dollar. Now see that we are admitted behind the scenes at once."

"You'll have to come around to the stage door. Mr. Throwall is awful particular about these here doors. They're always kept locked."

We followed him around to the side street and stepped inside the lobby to the stage door. The doorkeeper immediately rose.

"Wait here," said the usher to us. "I'll take your card in. I'll see what I can do for you."

So Howell gave him our cards, and he left us.

When he returned it was with the stout, bald-headed man who had come before the curtain to reassure the audience. He looked at us critically.

"I am Mr. Throwall's representative," he announced; "I understand you wish to see Miss North. It is impossible. Against the rules. We never allow—"

"Don't you understand we are relatives?" I cried; "she is ill; I can see it. I love her, and—"

"It is imperative we see her," said Howell, gently pushing me aside, and stepping in front of me; "this lady and Miss North are sisters. They have been separated three years. If—"

"It is impossible," reiterated the man; "the play isn't over yet, anyway. We—"

"But after?" I broke in; "I tell you I must; I will see her. You have no right to keep Miss North from her relatives. I'll appeal to—"

"My dear madam, this is a theater and the manager of it

recognizes no law but his own. You cannot force us to do anything against our will. We are autocrats here if we aren't anywhere else. Now if you do not go quietly from here, I shall have to ask the doorkeeper to—"

Howell caught my arm.

"Come, Peggy," he said; "we will go—for the present."

In the street I stood trembling as with the ague.

"She is ill—worse than they are permitting the audience to know. They'll carry her through the last act, even if she is—dying. Oh, Howell, Howell!"

Howell looked desperate, but he controlled himself manfully.

"Don't fret, dear. Now that we have located her, we can't lose her. I shall take you to her. We'll reach her. Now don't worry, little woman. We'll go back to the theater if you wish and see the rest of it—see if they have the hardihood to let her go on in—"

"Yes, yes," I interrupted eagerly; "we'll go back."

And we did, keeping well in the rear of the box, avoiding the curious eyes of the audience.

And the last act was played, and they brought Ophelia in on her bier, her pallid face half veiled by the strands of her beautiful hair, the edge of her silken robes coming down to the little feet, outlining the slender girl's form with an indescribable melancholy.

I could feel my heart beating in my throat. I felt it must burst with its tumult of aching thoughts. How I kept from screaming I don't know. I only know I gripped the arm of my chair and set my teeth and felt the hot, salt tears running down my face.

Howell, too, was deeply moved, and I heard him groan once. It was an awful, a heart-rending scene to both of us. It was a lifetime of agony—those minutes of that last act.

But before the curtain had fallen Howell and I were out of the theater hurrying around to the stage door. And there we waited, pacing up and down, up and down, looking eagerly into each face as the players came hurrying out. And at

last they had all gone and the one for whom I looked so anxiously had not come out. When the moments lengthened into half an hour Howell tried to get by the burly doorkeeper. But the man was a Hibernian of the most stalwart kind, and it was useless to dash one's strength against such a towering rock of sympathy and strength.

Vainly I endeavored to catch a sound from the darkened stage land behind the door. Everything was quiet. Whatever was occurring, wherever anyone was stationed, it must be far removed. But I had not seen the bald-headed man come out yet, and I was waiting for him.

And just then there came clattering up the street an ambulance clanging the soul-terrifying gong as it came along. It pulled up hurriedly in front of the stage door. I was thankful we were the only ones present. All the loiterers had disappeared some time ago. I grasped Howell's arm.

"Oh, it is for her—for Lal. She must not be taken to a hospital. Go get a carriage quickly. I'll see the ambulance surgeon."

Instantly he had hastened round the corner. Two men jumped down from the ambulance. One I instinctively recognized as the doctor.

"I beg your pardon," I began, speaking very rapidly, and catching hold of his coat sleeve, "but you must listen to me. Yes, you must," as he tried to brush me aside. "You've been called to attend my sister, my sister from whom I've been separated three years. They have refused me admittance here. They are brutes. But you shall not take her to the hospital. You won't let them, will you? Give her to me. She will have the best medical care."

"If this is true," answered the man, "most certainly the hospital authorities have nothing to do in the matter. Let me go. I will see to it for you."

He hastily broke away and, filled with the first hope I had had that evening, I turned to the curbing in time to see a carriage pull up, and Howell jumped from it.

"We shall have her, Howell. The surgeon promised," I said in a whisper, as he drew me to one side.

Then we heard voices, and the outer door of the stage entrance was thrown open and held so by a boy. And there came out four men, carrying on the door of a scene a figure covered with a cloak. I saw the face, and though the deathly pallor almost completely metamorphosed it, I knew it was Lal.

I sprang forward and caught her hand, which was hanging limply over the improvised stretcher.

"Lal!" I cried, in tones that I did not recognize as coming from myself.

But she did not hear me.

The bald-headed man, with his silk hat and overcoat trimmed overmuch with fur, tried to head me off. He frowned disagreeably. But the surgeon was my friend. He stepped forward.

"I cannot bring her out of her faint. I've tried every remedy I know. She's in a bad way. She needs immediate attention. If you take her with you—you have called this carriage?—I would advise stopping for Doctor Slocum on your way home. He is around the corner."

"Yes, yes," I said, choking; "at once. Give her to me. Give her to me."

"You will hold her? Well—that will do. Chafe her hands as you go along."

I was in the carriage now, and the kindly man, whom I ever afterwards blessed, with Howell, lifted the form, oh! so light, as he told me afterwards, and laid the dear figure in my waiting arms. And how lovingly they closed about her as the tired head fell listlessly to rest upon my bosom. And shall I be laughed at when I state that during that ride homeward my face was laid against her own, as I whispered into her unconscious ear the love and joy welling in my heart, and the happy future before us when she was well and strong again?

We stopped for Doctor Slocum and drove him home with us. He and Howell carried Lal upstairs to our rooms in the comfortable apartment house that had been our home for two years now. I could have borne her up the two flights myself. She was like a feather in my arms.

For an hour the three of us sat in earnest consultation about her. Doctor Slocum had made a careful examination and was watching for the effect of a strong restorative he had used.

"Heart lesion," he said briefly, as I hung over the bedside; "such a strain as she has undergone. It is written all over her face; it is apparent in every tendon of her poor little body. What a shame! So many brilliant lives go just this way. She had the making of a—"

"Had? Had?" I gasped; "you don't mean—Oh! you don't mean—"

"Why, I thought you saw it, my poor Mrs. Hope; I'm dreadfully sorry. But she can't live. She'll linger, but—It's terrible for you, but how can you wish her to live with a constitution shattered? I would have kept the knowledge from you if—"

"It is well you did not," said Howell, putting his arms around me and hushing my sobs against his breast; "it would have been a much greater shock if it had come to her later. Peggy, dear one, Doctor Slocum is right. You will come to see that."

Doctor Slocum turned away, visibly distressed. Presently he said:

"She is coming to, now. Watch her carefully. You'll have her for a few days yet, Mrs. Hope. I will return in the morning."

He went quietly out and I sank on my knees beside the bed, gazing into the pale face, the fluttering of whose eyelids betrayed returning consciousness. I heard Howell slip from my side, and I inwardly blessed him for his thoughtfulness. I knew he was not beyond call if I needed him, and yet he was far enough away to make my first meeting with Lal sacred.

I watched with a terrible yearning at my heart for her to open her eyes. Those eyes which had so long been lost to me; how would they regard me when consciousness came to them and she realized it was Peggy in the flesh before her? How would she regard me? What would be her first question? Would it be her old self or a new Lal that confronted me?

And at last it came, the moment for which I was waiting. Lal stirred slightly and opened her eyes. I waited, not daring to breathe, holding a bit of her dress in my hands. Then her glance fell upon me crouching by her side. She smiled.

"Why, Peggy," she said, and my heart gave a great leap, for the old ring of vivacity sounded in her voice; "is that really you? I dreamed you were kneeling beside me here. This is your home, isn't it? Yours and Howell's?"

"Lal!" I exclaimed in stifled tones, "don't you know me? Are you awake or—what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, you foolish Peggy. Are you so astonished to see me?" and she actually laughed.

I gasped out:

"Why, yes. Aren't you? Lal, Lal, dear; it is almost four years since you left home; since we have seen each other."

"Oh, I've seen you since then. You didn't know it, but I did. The night—let me think. It was one night—Oh, I can't remember when, my head's so horribly muddled about time and such things. But it was in the H——— House. They played the 'Moonlight Sonata.' It warned me. I knew something would happen and you and Howell came in. I saw you from my table. Oh, that Sonata, that terrible, beautiful Sonata! Peggy, do you remember how it goes? We heard it, don't you know—Thor's Island—long ago—"

She closed her eyes. I bent over her, terrified. "She's wandering," I thought; "she has not fully realized things yet."

"Rest, dear, if you wish it. In the morning we will talk if you feel well enough."

"Yes, in the morning," she said drowsily; "I'm so tired now."

In a very few minutes her regular breathing told me she slept. I softly called Howell, and at that silent hour of the night we arranged her as well as we could for the rest of her sleep.

I did not dare try to slip her into one of my night dresses for fear of awakening her. The silken robe she wore was more delicate than any nightgown. So I left it on her, only removing the rue and columbine and rosemary that still clung in the meshes of her hair. Howell brought me a basin of warm water, and after removing the kohl from her eyebrows and eyelashes I washed her face sweet and clean and freshened her hair about her temples with bay rum. Then I took off her shoes, which some one had half buttoned on for her before she had left the theater, and slipped on in their places my worsted night slippers.

This done, I laid down on the lounge beside her and watched all night.

CHAPTER XXI

In the morning just as the first streak of dawn had appeared in the spring sky, she called me. I rose hastily and crept into bed beside her.

"Is it really you, Peggy, dear?" she asked, and I saw the tears standing in her eyes; "everything was like a dream last night. Now I know we really are together. Dear, dear Peggy; has it seemed very long?"

"Long, Lal? Oh! how could you leave me in the way you did? How I have searched New York over for you."

"It was best so," she murmured; "I knew we must meet again, but hardly like this. I was beginning to be successful when the critics spoiled all. But I did better last night except for the miserable break in the fourth act. Seeing you broke me up completely. Something seemed to give way in-

side, some prop or something, and—I remember falling—nothing afterwards."

"Then when they carried you on for burial you were really unconscious!" I exclaimed, with anger in my voice.

"I suppose so. I must have been. Why, that was right, Peggy. The scene would have been ruined if they had had a substitute. That sounds conceited, but don't you know after the audience gets used—"

"Yes, yes, dear. I understand. Don't bother with such things. How do you feel?"

"Only a little weak. I shall have to resort to stimulants for the first time in my life to-day. I must be tided over for to-night, to-morrow and Saturday nights. I can rest Sunday."

"Why, what do you mean, Lal? You're not thinking—"

"Of playing to-night? Why, certainly. Why not? A little weakness of the knees mustn't upset an actress. Why, I've played when I've felt worse than this."

She laughed a little.

"Oh! Lal, Lal!" I cried, burying my face in the pillow beside her; "you are much more ill than you think. You can't possibly play to-night. Why, dear, the doctor came home with you last night."

"Absurd! And such an expense. I haven't much money saved, Peggy. I can't afford it," and she made a gesture of disapprobation.

"Dear, don't talk that way. Howell and I are comfortably settled. You are with us now. We shall see to you."

"It is like you. But you mustn't tempt me to break engagements. You always were opposed to the stage in connection with me, weren't you? You'd like to break into it. But you know, Peggy, I couldn't give that up. It's my life."

"Yes, Lal, but to-night? You can't play to-night. It's madness for you to think of it. Surely—" I urged.

She smiled sadly.

"You people out of the profession don't realize what it

is to lose even one night. I have an understudy, but, my goodness! I couldn't afford to give her a chance, poor girl. I am only getting my own now. You didn't change my dress," she said, glancing down at Ophelia's white robes; "it will be horribly wrinkled."

"I'll have it pressed. Will you change now?" I asked, mentally resolved to keep her mind away from the thought of playing that evening.

"No; not now. I'm too tired. Kiss me, Peggy. It is so good to have you by me again, even though I know you will be at your old tricks of managing things for me. And I've been so used to doing things for myself. I must sleep again, dear, and be fresh for to-night."

She turned over on her pillow, but spoke again before I had left her side for a few minutes to see Howell.

"Send out for all the papers, Peggy," she said; "I want to see how Ophelia fared. If the critics can overlook my fainting, maybe they'll say something nicer than they did of Desdemona and Lady Macbeth."

When Doctor Slocum came that morning I told him everything that had occurred since his departure. He looked troubled.

"She'll be so weak to-night she won't be able to stand. Then she'll realize her inability to play. You won't have to talk to her long about that. But the other—she doesn't realize how near death is. Best let her drift along. If you tell her I'm afraid the shock will be so great it may—it may carry her off suddenly."

I could not speak. Howell took him into the next room. They were gone some little time. When they returned to me where I sat at the table with my head buried in my arms the doctor put his hand kindly upon my shoulder.

"She is still asleep. There is nothing I can do for her. She'll not suffer any pain. Be with her as much as you can, though I don't have to tell you that. She'll drift out. She hasn't an ounce of vitality left. She's expended it all."

"She had more life than any girl I ever saw," said Howell, shaking his head.

"More's the pity. But the brightest light burns the quickest. I shall be in again. Humor her, but don't let her worry or get excited."

He went out, and I returned to the bedroom. Lal still slept. All morning she lay quietly while I sat near her looking up every now and then from Howell's socks I was darning to watch her still face. More often I would drop my work and lean forward to see if her gentle breathing actually heaved her breast.

In the afternoon as I sat working, looking down at her suddenly, I found her eyes wide open and watching me in the old way she used to in Nineveh.

"Oh, you're awake," I said cheerfully; "shall I read to you, or—"

"Not now. I want to talk. But first set my mind at rest. Were the criticisms good?"

"Excellent. Let me get them and read them to you."

"By and by. I don't care about them so much, now. But they said my Ophelia was good? They didn't make a to-do about my wretched fainting spell, did they?"

"They touched upon it very lightly. What shall we talk about? I'm waiting patiently to hear all about you, Lal, from the hour you left home till the moment I found you last night."

I saw a shadow creep across her face.

"Not of myself. Oh, don't let's talk of myself, but of you and Howell. Give me your history since I left Nineveh. Come, sit over here, Peggy, on the edge of the bed and recount everything."

She caught my two hands and kissed them ecstatically like a child. I bent over her.

"Nothing at all to tell, Lal, dear. Only that I am very happy," I answered, looking into her eyes and trying to smile away the pain at my heart.

"Then—Howell showed his good sense by appreciating the girl he had won, after all," she said with a sympathetic squeeze of my hand.

"Howell loves me; I know that, and since knowing it I

have been very happy. With you here I want nothing else."

"But he? How did you find it out?" she queried with interest.

"After my illness."

"Illness? When was that?"

"When you left Nineveh. I was frantic, and after all the other excitement I gave way. Howell nursed me through my sickness. When I got well he told me he loved me. He had known it when he realized I had gone down to the edge of the Valley of Shadow and might not return. But you —Oh! Lal, dear—"

I felt my voice breaking as I thought of how soon she might be taken from me.

She looked at me suspiciously.

"Happiness doesn't agree with you, Peggy. Ever since you've had me you've had tears in your voice or face. Didn't I tell you I should make you proud of me? Well, I shall yet. We met a little too early in the day, for Fame coquets with so many and doesn't come till after long years. But I shall work hard and you'll see—"

"Oh, Lal, Lal!" I cried, wondering if it were right to keep silence; "you'll break my heart. You are in no condition for work. You—"

"Hush. Hush. Who can tell my own strength as well as I myself? I shall prove to you how well able I am to cope with fatigue. I haven't any of my own clothes here. Let me have something of yours and send for mine."

"What are you going to do?" I ejaculated.

"Do? Why, dress, to be sure. Then I'm going round to the theater. I want to see Mr. Manton."

Powerless, I gazed at her. To remonstrate with her would only excite her, and I must obey orders. I watched her throw back the clothes with a feeble attempt at briskness, and putting out her slippered feet she gained the floor. For an instant only. She turned deathly white, staggered, and I caught her in my arms and laid her back among the pillows. She lay panting for a moment.

"You see, dear," I said gently, though I felt my lips were trembling.

"Am I as weak as that?" she whispered, clinging to me. "Oh! Peggy, I'm shaking inside. I feel so strange. Am I going to die, do you think?"

"Would you be afraid, Lallie?" I asked, as I kissed her.

"Afraid? Not of the hereafter—no. But the going. I'm too young; why, I'm not twenty-five. Why did you ask me that, Peggy? Why—your hands are icy—why do you look at me so? Am I—am I—"

Her respiration came in quick catchings of the breath.

"Oh! I'm going to die. You know it. You've been told. The doctor. Tell me—tell me," she implored.

Holding her hands against my breast, with my face close to hers, I told her then, quieting her shuddering breaths by a calmness I have marveled at since in myself.

She lay motionless as I finished. Her eyes held an expression I did not quite understand. She raised them and looked into my face searchingly.

"This is true, Peggy. I know it. I feel it now," she said quietly, only her frightful pallor betraying how awful the intelligence had been to her.

"Yes, Lal; though God knows it is bitterly cruel," I answered, sobbing.

She closed her eyes a moment.

"It is that," she said; "but there must be wisdom back of it. Do you think it will be to-night? When will I go?"

"It won't be—it can't be—to-night. You will be spared me for a little while."

"I ask for a special reason. I—"

"Your mother? Adelaide?" I asked; "they can be reached—"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no. I have lived without them. I shall die without them. Remember now, Peggy, that I bear no ill will toward them because of the past. Some natures can outlive injuries. But while I feel no anger at all toward them, I don't want to

see them. Don't let them even know of my death. It would do no good."

"Then your reason?" I asked.

"Attend to it quickly, will you? Send for Yale. He is here, in New York. I want him."

"Yale!" I repeated, with stupefaction numbing my faculties, "Yale Beresford? Oh, Lal! did you meet him?—know him afterwards?"

Again the expression I did not understand entered her eyes. Her hand closed tightly over mine.

"Yes. It was Fate," she said; "even though you tried to save me by destroying his letter. But something we can't fathom rules these things. I loved him the night he came down to Nineveh, and—"

"Lal!"

"Yes, I loved him then and afterwards in the company—Childslea's company must always be *the* company to me—I loved him—Oh! Peggy, you don't know how I have loved him!" she said with a pitiful break in her voice.

"And he, Lal?" I demanded, almost fiercely; "he didn't play with you?"

"He loved me, too," she said simply; "he does to this day. But he allowed love to get control of the reins and outstrip honor. We were married, Peggy, but—he had a wife living."

"The cur!" I broke forth; "I knew there was something back of those handsome eyes of his. A man of his type always makes his mistakes early in life. Oh, Lal, my dear girl, what a hound—to ruin your life."

"Don't, Peggy. Not a word against him. I can't bear it. I—"

"You love him? After what he has done?"

"Yes. I love him more than formerly. Separation has been terrible."

"Then you left him?"

"I left him the instant I learned—a week after we had been married."

"Oh! Lal, this is awful. And you must see him now?"

"It is the only thing that will comfort my going," she said, quietly; "three years without him have not dulled the pain. There is no wrong in—"

"No wrong, no. But he doesn't deserve one word of forgiveness or love from you!" I cried indignantly.

"Perhaps not. How many of us do? Send the telegram for me. One word—'Come.' And sign my name. Address it to The Players'. It will reach him before the performance to-night. They are playing at the Government Theater, but he takes his meals at the Club."

I rose to send our little maid out with the telegram. But as I passed the window my attention was arrested by the figure of a man of magnificent build coming at a swinging gait down the street. I paused, irresistibly held, and as he approached nearer I recognized the actor. He was looking at the numbers on the houses as he came along. He spied ours, and ran up the steps. Then I heard the bell ring in the rear of our apartments.

"That is Mr. Beresford now, Lal," I said, and my heart throbbed to see the color leap with great violence to her face. "I had better see him first, and—"

"No, Peggy. I want him to hear all from my lips. Take the screen away from the fire, will you? It looks so bright and cheery, and this is such a late spring. Don't light the gas. This glow is light enough. I hear his voice in the hall. Oh! bring him quickly. Yale! Yale!"

For the door was opened swiftly and he whom I had so admired and feared that night in Nineveh entered. He did not seem to see a thing in the room but the one for whom he was searching. A quick glance toward the bed, a cry from him that thrilled me and he was at the bedside on his knees, his arms enfolding something white and choking, his murmured words mingling with her own.

I saw a light like a glory spread over Lal's face as Beresford drew her to his breast and bent his lips to her own. Then I slipped out. Whatever his faults, whatever the wrong

he had done her, she loved him and she was to lose all that made life inviting in such a little time. Her remaining hours upon earth should be happy ones if I had my way.

An hour later I returned to look in quietly. Still in each other's arms, with no thought in the world save that they were reunited, their voices met my ear, Beresford's low and tender, Lal's sweet and pleading.

I went out again, but returned in half an hour, fearing a protracted happiness. I caught the sound of deep groans, now, and I knew it was the heart agony of a strong man. Lal's voice was uttering its tenderest tones and I saw her white hand upon the bowed head at her side.

"We can't change it, Yale, my beloved," she was saying, "and perhaps after a year or so you will be glad that we couldn't."

"Don't torture me," came in frenzied accents from Beresford; "life loses all its wealth when I lose you. Oh! the irony of it. To come to you with the news of my release by death, only to learn that it is death that takes you from me. God! but there could not be a crueler punishment!"

He buried his face in his hands again and tearless sobs shook his body heavily.

Deeply moved, I went out again and closed the door.

About the hour I knew actors must be preparing for the theater I returned to the bedroom. Lal heard me this time and spoke to me.

"Come here, Peggy," she said, "and persuade Yale to go to the theater. He won't listen to me."

"If you can't persuade him, do you think I can?" I asked, going to the bedside.

Beresford raised his face as I approached. Its haggard expression was terrible to see.

"Will you oblige me by telegraphing to the theater?" he said. His voice sounded like that of a man recovering from a long illness. "I shall not leave her till she goes."

"Yale!" cried Lal.

The joyful note in her speech was like a bird's carol.

"Dear little girl!" he murmured brokenly, and as he took

her in his arms again, I saw him hide his face against her breast.

Howell was first officer on a steamer plying between New York and Boston, so he was not home that night. The actor and I watched her throughout the midnight hours. He would take no rest. If she slept he knelt beside her, watching her as one who guards his treasure. If she waked he talked to her, holding her with such infinite yearning that I felt the tears start to my eyes with a rush.

So she was with us three days, and Beresford never left her. I learned afterward how he had jeopardized his position to be with her. Her going was very quiet, as Doctor Slocum had said.

She loved to have only the bright fire kindled in my room, and with the shades drawn and no other light, lie talking to us, or, as we noticed at the last, have us talk to her. I sat by her side, holding one blue veined hand, Beresford with his arms about her.

Sitting thus that afternoon she said, suddenly turning her eyes a moment from Beresford's pain-lined face to me:

"Do you remember what my idea of happiness was?"

"Yes, dear," I answered, as I recalled her words that morning in Howell's *Halcyon*, so long ago.

"Well—I missed it," she said; "my task is undone, my work is unfinished. And life and love gone, too! I must leave you two—you two—all I had."

Beresford stroked her hair with a tenderness that thrilled me.

"We were happy, dear child. Your love did much for me, Lal. I could thank your God for it. Oh, my darling! My darling!'

His dark eyes grew softer for the unshed tears in them.

"Howell will get his highest hope, though," she said brightly; "he'll be captain yet. Tell him I wish him luck, Peggy."

We saw her strength ebbing fast. When she began noticeably to grow weaker it was with great bounds, as she had done everything all her life. She could not articulate

well toward the last. But just before she died she seemed to think of something and made an effort to speak.

She looked up into Beresford's face with a smile.

"The yellow dress," she said; "what became of it?"

"I have it, sweet. I carried it with me everywhere. The little slippers, too, I stole that day you refused to kiss me. I tied them with ribbon. They were never away from my dressing-room."

"Bury me in them," she whispered, drawing his face close to hers; "you and Peggy lay me out—you will not forget?"

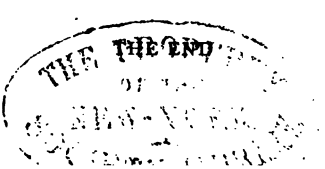
"No, dear child. It shall be so. I will fasten the hooks myself as I did that night," he answered brokenly.

She closed her eyes as if satisfied. A moment later a barely perceptible tremor seized her. We, watching intently, saw the unmistakable impress of death stealing over her features. Slowly it settled, and when I heard a groan break from the actor I knew that the last spark of wonderful vitality had flickered out in the dear body.

When she grew cold Beresford took her two small hands in his own with a pitiful attempt to warm them. I saw him lay them down with a look Dante may have seen upon the face of a lost soul.

"She is really gone," he said, as if striving to comprehend something; "the death of the woman who separated us makes this child mine. I want her body. I shall bury her."

And looking down into the face of the loved dead in which both our lives had been so enwrapt, I made my only sacrifice when I nodded a silent acquiescence.

He did not seem inclined to move, he seemed powerless to leave her. The moments with the dead are sacred ones. I felt an unspoken wish and left the room. But he did not look at me. His eyes never left her face.

When I returned a half hour later Beresford was on his knees praying.